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Nevada regulators latest to take aim at controversial coyote-killing contests

By **Hillary Davis** ([contact](#))

Tuesday, March 23, 2021 | 2 a.m.

Nudged by a Clark County resolution last month against organized, competitive coyote hunts, the Nevada Department of Wildlife Commission is also considering a ban on such contests.

The arguments remain the same: Those who oppose regulation say coyotes are a threat to humans, pets, livestock and prey game and need control. Those who want to see the hunts outlawed say the “wildlife killing contests” have no ecological benefit and are gruesome, unethical waste.

“I doubt any of those that have provided input or those providing input today will question their biases or rethink their position as a result of the testimony offered,” wildlife Commissioner Dave McNinch said. “There will also be a lot of data used and misused to support various positions and probably a lot of perceived logic flaws and inaccurate statements.”

The commission during a weekend meeting didn’t commit to new regulations, but said it would bring the topic back later this year.

Department Director Tony Wasley said Nevada hosted about two dozen competitive coyote hunts in the last year, but he doesn’t know how many coyotes were taken, or, more important, from where. The hunts come with prizes in categories like most or largest animals culled.

Wasley said studies on coyote control require that the canids be substantiated as the predator limiting the prey — like deer — and that at least 70% of the animals in any given area had to be removed. He said with a lack of data, it’s hard to say if the culls have any real, population-level impacts either way.

Further, predator-caused mortality isn’t necessarily additive, he said. In many instances it’s compensatory.

“As a biologist, I believe that there’s often an oversimplified relationship between predator control and the presumed benefit to prey species,” Wasley said. “The relationship is far more complicated, it’s far more complex than a simple removal of something with claws and fangs that could potentially eat prey — if there’s fewer of those then there’s always going to be more prey.”

Commissioner Kerstan Hubbs distilled that by saying the hunts don’t keep the coyote population from exploding. “However, many people believe that is true,” she said.

And others believe images of piles of dead coyotes are distasteful, she said.

But Brian Burris, speaking in support of the hunts, said he wanted the commission to follow science, not emotion.

“I ask this board to actually go through, find the science, follow the science, and don’t let Clark County — one small urban area — rule the state of Nevada and tell this commission what they should be doing,” he said.

Michelle Lute, a biologist from the organization Project Coyote, said she also supports science-based modern wildlife management. And as a former state biologist in New Mexico, where the hunts are banned, they offer no benefits whatsoever, she said.

“They beget chaos across the landscape with unregulated killing of predators that do not need such control,” Lute said. “Predators self-regulate and have done so based on compensatory mechanisms, competitors and native prey availability for millennia.”

Patrick Donnelly, Nevada state director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the hunts are “barbaric and anachronistic” and most people find them repellent.

“Not only are these contests unsporting and wasteful but they are also ecologically harmful and deeply at odds with the principles of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which requires that wildlife only be killed for a legitimate purpose,” he said. “We may have our own objections to that particular model but if it is the credo that legitimate hunters wrap themselves in, it’s clear that this is not a legitimate hunting activity.”

Paul Dixon chairs a Clark County advisory board for the wildlife department, which voted to suggest the state commission now take action on another ban attempt. He said the number of animals taken at these events is low, and the ban would be a slippery slope that could lead to a reluctance to remove problematic urban coyotes.

Coyotes are not protected by federal or state laws; it is not illegal to hunt coyotes in Nevada without a license.

McNinch emphasized that a ban would narrowly focus on the organized, competitive hunts. It would not prohibit individuals from dispatching coyotes to protect themselves or their property, harvesting their pelts, or from hunting coyotes outside of an organized contest. It also wouldn’t impact fishing or chukar derbies or big buck contests.

Years of efforts

Nevada has been here before.

In 2015, the state wildlife commission considered a public petition to ban the contests but dismissed the petition as incomplete. A more specific petition resurfaced later that year, but the commission voted it down over concerns with the regulatory process.

In 2016, a group of commissioners drew up a draft policy, but the full commission noted that as a policy, and not a binding regulation, it would be unenforceable. The commission then turned away from crafting new regulation.

In 2019, the Nevada state Senate introduced a bill that would have made coyote contests a felony. The proposed legislation died in committee.

But in February, the Clark County Commission pitched its own resolution against the contests, which it finalized earlier this month. Several states that have legally banned predator hunting contests, including California, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado, have also called them unethical and ineffective ways to maintain the balance of predator and prey animals. Clark County Commissioner Justin Jones has said the bans in nearby states have pushed the hunts to Nevada.

Though merely a nonbinding statement of opposition, the Clark County resolution urged McNinch — who also opposes the hunts — to bring it back before his colleagues, saying he wanted to get ahead of the lingering issue.

The last World Championship Coyote Calling Contest — “calling” is a preferred term among participants in the organized hunts — was held outside Elko, in rural far northeastern Nevada.

And for its part, the Elko County Commission voted this month to support future contests, saying the contests complement existing federal programs to control predators and protect the county’s important livestock industry. In a resolution calling out the Southern Nevada opposition, Elko’s statement says “eliminating ‘killing contests’ would be the camel’s nose under the tent that could eventually threaten such wholesome family events like fishing derbies; and ... Nevada’s counties should be allowed to make their own decisions regarding hunting contests. Clark County should not be allowed to dictate what is legal in the rural counties.”

Elko County Commissioner and rancher Wilde Brough said at the March 17 meeting that one of his newborn calves had died the day before after being attacked by a coyote before it was even out of its mother. He also blamed coyotes for decimating the area’s deer population.

“They don’t know anything about these coyotes and what they are in Elko County and what they do,” Brough said. “They have no idea.”

McNinch said he recognized the fears hunters have about losing rights and privileges one piece at a time.

“Whether we like it or not, even though the vast majority of sportsmen don’t even participate in them, the negative connotations associated with killing contests reflect negatively on hunting.

Fellow commissioner Tom Barnes, however, didn’t see the difference between competitive coyote hunts and fishing derbies, and perception may not line up with reality.

“I look at them as people with like-minded ideas going out to do something that they all enjoy ... It’s hard for me to get my head wrapped around this perception of it being so horrible,” Barnes said.