



# Executive Summary: Investigation of Wildlife Services

**“Removing native carnivores from an ecosystem results in exploding populations of rodents and other small mammals that carry disease and compete with game species for food.”**

~Tom Knudson/  
Sacramento Bee

In a recent hard-hitting cover-story series in the Sacramento Bee, Pulitzer-prize winning investigative journalist Tom Knudson exposed the inhumane, environmentally damaging, and fiscally irresponsible killing practices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services program. Through interviews and the Freedom of Information Act, Knudson found that the program’s practices and culture are profoundly out of line with both sound environmental policy and fiscal responsibility. This document summarizes his findings.

## Key Findings from Tom Knudson’s Investigation of Wildlife Services

- Since 2000, Wildlife Services has mistakenly killed more than 50,000 non-target animals not considered threats to agriculture, using leg-hold traps, wire snares, and poisons. Among these animals are federally protected species such as golden and bald eagles, as well as over 1,100 dogs.
  - Since 1987, at least 18 Wildlife Services employees and several members of the public have been exposed to cyanide upon inadvertently triggering M-44s, spring-loaded devices that are intended to poison coyotes with sodium cyanide.
  - Many people have been injured during the course of Wildlife Services’ aerial gunning operations, and ten people have died in crashes since 1979.
  - Scientific data has revealed that Wildlife Services’ slaughter of native carnivores, which has ostensibly been undertaken in an effort to protect livestock and big game species, is altering ecosystems in ways that diminish biodiversity, degrade habitat and invite disease.
  - According to Wildlife Services’ own records, the agency has accidentally killed animals from more than 150 species since 2000—and insiders have indicated that agency records dramatically underestimate the impact that the “killing agency” and its practices have had on non-target species.
- Over the course of 8 years, Wildlife Services has spent approximately \$550,000 and has killed 967 coyotes and 45 mountain lions on just one project in northwest Nevada in the name of protecting mule deer, a big game species. After nearly a decade of needless spending and slaughter, mule deer populations have not improved.
  - Indiscriminately killing coyotes to protect game species is a misguided and ineffective practice. Removing native carnivores from an ecosystem results in exploding populations of rodents and other small mammals that carry disease and compete with game species for food. It also leads, ultimately, to larger and smarter coyote populations.
  - Scientists, former Wildlife Services employees, and others acknowledge that the agency’s killing practices are ineffective and can cause chain reactions of adverse environmental consequences.



*Maggie, a border collie, was killed by a Wildlife Services Conibear trap just 45 feet from her family’s back yard. She died of strangulation and a broken neck after being caught in the trap’s vice grip. Maggie is one of many beloved family pets that have been killed by Wildlife Services’ indiscriminate and inhumane traps and poisons.*

<sup>1</sup> See Tom Knudson, *Wildlife Services’ deadly force opens Pandora’s box of environmental problems*, SACRAMENTO BEE, Apr. 30, 2012, at 1A; Tom Knudson, *The killing agency: Wildlife Services’ brutal methods leave a trail of animal death*, SACRAMENTO BEE, Apr. 29, 2012, at 1A.



**“Since 2000, more than 90 species of wildlife have died by mistake in agency traps, including pronghorn antelope, mule deer, river otters, swift foxes, badgers, porcupines and federally protected bald eagles, government records show.” ~Tom Knudson/Sacramento Bee**



Three coyotes caught in leg-hold traps await death in this photo taken by a Wildlife Services trapper in Nevada. The coyote in the foreground is attacked by the trapper's dogs. Wildlife Services captures and kills 10,000 to 12,000 animals using leg-hold traps each year. As Knudson explains, “[n]o tool in Wildlife Services’ arsenal kills more nonselectively—or slowly—than the leg-hold trap. Since 2000, more than 90 species of wildlife have died by mistake in agency traps, including pronghorn antelope, mule deer, river otters, swift foxes, badgers, porcupines and federally protected bald eagles, government records show. But whether animals are caught accidentally or not, they often struggle for days and die of exposure, injuries and other causes long before a trapper returns to the site.”

## Opportunities for Reform

- Conduct a federal investigation of Wildlife Services’ practices, policies and protocols as requested by Representatives Campbell, DeFazio, Gallegly, and Speier, as well as the American Society of Mammalogists.
- Support H.R. 4214, the Compound 1080 and Sodium Cyanide Elimination Act, a bill that would ban the use of two deadly poisons—sodium fluoroacetate and sodium cyanide—to kill wildlife. These poisons represent a substantial threat to both animals and humans.
- Prohibit costly and dangerous aerial gunning activities, especially in wilderness areas.
- Provide incentives and technical assistance to ranchers to promote adoption of non-lethal methods for resolving conflicts between livestock and predators.
- Prohibit use of indiscriminate body-gripping traps (leg-hold traps, Conibears, and snares) on public lands and mandate a 24-hour trap check time in all states.
- Mandate transparency and accountability in all program actions. Emphasize recordkeeping.
- Define how livestock losses must be documented and who must verify losses.
- Require science-based decision-making in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act. At present, Wildlife Services is relying on an outdated and inadequate programmatic environmental impact statement.
- Eliminate the practice of killing native predators to artificially boost populations of ungulates, such as elk and deer.
- Mandate that Wildlife Services consistently research and evaluate the efficacy, as well as the costs and benefits, of any wildlife control program.
- Conduct an ethical review of Wildlife Services’ policies and practices. Require ethics training for staff and cooperators.
- Redirect program spending toward development and enhancement of public education in non-lethal approaches to avoiding conflict with native wildlife.

As Knudson’s series reveals, Wildlife Services and its inhumane, ineffective practices are in need of drastic reform. Ask your legislators to stop the use of taxpayer dollars for the indiscriminate slaughter of America’s native predators and non-target species.

<sup>2</sup> A number of recommendations are discussed in greater detail in Knudson’s series. See Tom Knudson, *Suggestions in changing Wildlife Services range from new practices to outright bans*, SACRAMENTO BEE, May 6, 2012, at 1A.