

Executive Summary

Wildlife Services, a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture,¹ was a major force in eliminating wolf and grizzly bear populations in the continental United States by 1940. Today, it spends over \$100 million annually to kill more than one million animals— primarily birds, and hundreds of thousands of mammals such as black and grizzly bears, beavers, mountain lions, coyotes, and wolves.

In 1994, Wildlife Services then called “Animal Damage Control,” prepared a programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In 1997, the agency reissued the document with some corrections, and to this day, Wildlife Services relies on this outdated PEIS. For this report, we reviewed the PEIS and some of the scientific literature that Wildlife Services has issued since 1994. While the major thrust of this report reveals the social, economic, and biological problems associated with eliminating large numbers of native carnivores such as coyotes, wolves, and bears, we also describe eleven biological agents used to kill species, and review the efficacy of trapping, and shooting wildlife from aircraft—a practice termed “aerial gunning.”

Wildlife Services aerial guns, traps and snares animals, and broadcasts a panoply of dangerous toxicants—that harm a variety of taxa. Between 2004 and 2007, Wildlife Services killed 8,378,412 animals. The numbers of mammals in the kill has increased in recent years. In 2004, for instance, the agency killed 179,251 mammals compared with 207,341 in 2006. Wildlife Services has escalated the numbers of endangered species it killed in recent years for a total of 2,481 individuals, primarily gray wolves, since 1996.

Yet, Wildlife Services cannot count each poisoned individual. Many toxic bait sites go undocumented. Grizzly bears may trigger an M-44, a device that expels deadly sodium cyanide, only to die unnoticed in the wilderness. Numerous family dogs have been exposed to M-44s, as have people. Tens of thousands of birds, poisoned by DRC-1339, rain down from the sky forcing some homeowners to scoop them up with pitchforks. Because the toxicant can take three days to act, many birds are not found and included in the agency’s statistics. Wildlife Services sprays pesticides from helicopters onto cattails in wetlands to reduce breeding sites for migratory blackbirds to benefit the sunflower industry. These treatments likely cause harm to wetland functionality, water quality, and wildlife habitats.

Why the slaughter? Biologists, economists, and federal oversight agencies have criticized the efficacy of Wildlife Services. Biologists have dubbed the agency’s predator-control program the “sledgehammer approach” to wildlife management because of the breadth of extermination. Large-scale, predator-killing programs are unsustainable and environmentally harmful. Few livestock producers actually experience predator problems because most unintended cattle and sheep deaths come from birthing problems, disease, or weather, *but not* predation. An economic study shows that lamb prices, wages and hay costs, but rarely

¹ The full name of the agency is U.S. Department of Agriculture-Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service-Wildlife Services; its acronym is USDA-APHIS-WS; we use the acronym in the tables to save space.

predators harm sheep producers. More ominous, several federal agencies determined that Wildlife Services' practices prove hazardous.

Wildlife Services presents a national security threat, according to federal oversight agencies. In a series of audits since 2001, the USDA's Office of Inspector General has sanctioned Wildlife Services for its unsafe handling of lethal biological agents, toxins that could be used in biological warfare. Particularly sodium cyanide and Compound 1080, both of which can be used in chemical warfare and are extremely toxic to humans.

In November 2007, Wildlife Services itself admitted that it had experienced a "wake of accidents" that involved its aerial gunning program, its hazardous chemicals inventory, and more. The aerial gunning program, for instance, caused ten fatalities and 28 injuries to federal employees and contractors. In March 2008, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a notice of warning letter to Wildlife Services for its illegal and unsafe placement of M-44s that resulted in the injury of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist and the death of his hunting dog.

Wildlife Services skirts around disclosure laws. For instance, in July 2000, WildEarth Guardians (formerly Sinapu) requested documents pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act concerning aircraft accidents. The response arrived October 2007—seven years late, and incomplete. A major report was missing and 82 of 400 pages were redacted. Wildlife Services finds federal disclosure laws inconvenient. Despite its public status and funding sources, Wildlife Services remains publicly unaccountable.

Most of Wildlife Services' budget comes from federal tax dollars, but states and counties also contribute. The agency receives funding from private cooperators such as the Woolgrowers Association and the Cattlemen's Association. This biologically and fiscally expensive program burdens taxpayers.

Wildlife Services massacres America's wildlife to benefit agribusiness. It argues that the government's role "in preventing and controlling damage caused by wildlife is sensible" because "wildlife belong in common to the country's citizens" (Chapter 3, p. 51). Yet taxpayers are unwittingly funding the death of hundreds of thousands of animals each year. Those deaths are conducted in ways that are harmful to the environment, the public, protected species, and family pets.

Viable non-lethal alternatives to using dangerous toxicants, traps, and aerial gunning are available but go unused. While practical and time-tested non-lethal aids are available to the livestock industry and farmers, the federal government neither heartily uses them, nor does it spend significant resources developing new ones. Wildlife Services is the wildlife equivalent of Blackwater, shooting first and deflecting questions later.

WildEarth Guardians does not believe that Wildlife Services is accountable to the public. Its mode of operation is anachronistic, reckless, and dangerous, and we call upon Congress to abolish this agency.