

# Suggestions in changing Wildlife Services range from new practices to outright bans

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Like many ranchers, Bill Jensen drives a pickup, shoots a high-powered rifle and loves to talk about sheep, cattle and the outdoors.

But unlike many ranchers, he no longer relies on the federal government for predator control.

Nor does the Marin County rancher have a choice. Ten years ago Marin, known for its environmental activism, halted lethal federal control and launched a program emphasizing nonlethal methods. Jensen, initially skeptical, has turned the program into a success with miles of electric fencing.

“We’ve pretty much learned how to control coyotes on our own,” said Jensen, whose losses to coyotes have declined 60 percent to 70 percent – from about 50 lambs a year when a federal trapper worked there to 15 to 20 today. “Anything that can help you 24 hours a day, like electric fencing, is a good thing.”

What’s happening in Marin County shows that ranchers can co-exist with predators without lethal federal control. It is part of a broader and varied spirit of reform aimed at finding new, less destructive ways to live with predators and other wildlife.

The target of that effort – a little-known division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture called Wildlife Services – has

long specialized in destroying animals considered to be a threat to agriculture, the public and the environment.

Since 2006, employees have trapped, shot and poisoned more than a half million coyotes and other predators, along with 300-plus other species, from non-native starlings and pigeons to red-tailed hawks, prairie dogs, beaver and other native birds and mammals. In the process, they have also accidentally killed more than 50,000 non-target animals, from domestic dogs to golden eagles to black bears.

“People want to see bears. They want to see wolves. They want to see mountain lions. It’s part of the natural heritage of the United States,” said Michael Mares, president of the American Society of Mammalogists. “We should be stewards of the system, not wiping out species and damaging ecosystems.”

Ideas for reform include more nonlethal control, curtailing aerial gunning, a ban on traps, snares and cyanide poison and pouring more resources into controlling invasive species. Some critics are calling for an investigation of Wildlife Services’ trapping practices and perhaps eliminating the agency altogether.

“As a fiscal conservative and a budget hawk, why is the taxpayer paying for this?” said Rep. John Campbell, a Republican from Irvine and one of the agency’s leading critics.

“We’re in a period in which everything in the budget is being looked at,” Campbell said. “Here we have a program that is not very effective, has a number of unintended consequences and costs millions of dollars.”

Many, of course, do not support change, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, which represents more than 6 million farmers and ranchers nationwide. “They provide a lot of valuable services,” Richard Krause, senior director of congressional relations for the federation, said of Wildlife

Services.

“They help control predators and pests that cause millions of dollars in damage to agricultural producers every year, from crops to livestock,” Krause said. “We support the idea of what Wildlife Services does.”

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