

Wildlife Service tightens dog policy

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Stung by charges of animal abuse, Wildlife Services – the federal government’s animal damage control agency – has adopted new guidelines for how its employees are to handle dogs in the field.

The change comes after an agency employee’s photos surfaced on the web in November showing his hunting dogs attacking a coyote caught in a leg-hold trap. The March 1 directive outlaws such behavior.

Wildlife advocates say it does not go far enough. They say Wyoming-based Wildlife Services trapper Jamie Olson should be fired and are calling on the agency to disclose the results of an investigation of the incident.

“This is unacceptable behavior for anyone, but such brutality is particularly alarming when demonstrated by a government employee tasked with responsibly managing wildlife,” wrote Cathy Liss, president of the Animal Welfare Institute, and Camilla Fox, executive director of Project Coyote, in a March 15 letter to the agency.

An online petition sponsored by Project Coyote calling for Olson’s termination has gathered more than 54,000 signatures.

Wildlife Services deputy administrator William Clay responded on March 25, writing to Liss and Fox that the investigation by USDA’s Administrative Investigations Compliance Branch is still in progress.

“Inhumane treatment of animals, if confirmed by a thorough review of the facts, would discredit the hundreds of

professional, caring and responsible Wildlife Service employees dedicated to serving the American people," Clay wrote.

Agency employees trap, shoot and poison hundreds of thousands of birds and mammals a year that are deemed a threat to agriculture, the public or the environment. Dogs are used to track, detect and disperse animals and as live decoys to lure coyotes within rifle range.

A 2004 agency directive said such activities "must be in compliance with state and local laws" and "dogs must be controllable at all times."

The new directive, dated March 1, is more explicit.

"WS personnel shall not allow their trained dogs to have physical contact or in any way attack, bite or kill animals that are restrained in a trap or any other device," it reads. "If a trained dog makes contact with a restrained animal, WS personnel must immediately intervene."