California wildlife officials on Wednesday banned coyote hunting contests that have sparked a culture clash by offering cash and other prizes to marksmen who killed the most animals.

It was the first ban of its kind in the nation, according to Camilla Fox, executive director of Project Coyote, which petitioned the state to end the popular contests that occur almost every month in California or nearby states.

The vote by the state Fish and Game Commission allows hunters to shoot as many of the predators as they wish year-round but stops the awarding of prizes.

Commissioner Jack Baylis said the state also needs to consider limiting how many predators a hunter is permitted to kill while respecting responsible hunters and allowing ranchers to manage their livestock.

“Awarding prizes for wildlife killing contests is both unethical and inconsistent with our modern understand of natural systems,” Michael Sutton, president of the commission, said during the meeting in the Van Nuys area of Los Angeles.

The board approved the ban with a 4-1 vote. Commissioner Jacque Hostler-Carmesin, the lone dissenter, said she was waiting for more scientific research before she could support the ban.

The hunting derbies reward shooters who bag the tallest pile of coyote carcasses with cash, belt buckles, camouflage hunting gear or other prizes.

Fox said the hunts are a cruel throwback to the days before dog- and cock-fighting were banned.

“It’s immoral, reprehensible and something that should be part of our history books,” she said.
California cattle ranchers lost more than $4 million in 2010 to predators, with coyotes committing the largest number of attacks, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s most recent figures.

Those losses — and the culture of ranchland life in the West — have spurred the spread of coyote prize hunts across California over the years.

Hunter and cattlemaster Buck Parks said he and his neighbors in rural Northern California won’t turn a blind eye to coyotes killing livestock and wildlife.

He said people opposed to coyote hunting don’t witness the damage done by coyotes.

Parks is president of the Pit River Rod and Gun Club, which has drawn protests for its coyote hunts based in the Modoc County town of Adin.

Before the commission vote, Parks said the club would abide by the decision. But that won’t end coyote hunting, he said.

“We’re not focused on that one weekend hunt,” Parks said. “We’re focused on trying to encourage folks to get out and help manage these predators by hunting them.”

Coyote hunting happens in most states across the country with no bag limit.

Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity said prize hunts are most common in western states. In Idaho, environmentalists blocked a wolf and coyote derby from occurring next month on vast wilderness areas controlled by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Organizers say they’ll hold the contest elsewhere.

Scott Gardner, a senior environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, said coyotes are not a threatened or endangered species, and might even be on the rise.

Coyote advocates said the hunting contests do not reflect good sportsmanship and have not been proven to prevent livestock losses.

They also say coyotes play an important role in nature, feeding on rodents and dead animals.

The call for a ban on the contests was spurred in part by the fear that coyote hunters could mistakenly kill gray wolves, which this year were listed as endangered in California. The animals were hunted to extinction almost a century ago in California, but in the past three years, a GPS-outfitted wolf known as OR-7 has been crossing from Oregon into Northern California.

Coyote hunter Curtis Wright, a 32-year-old electrical engineer from Palmdale, sees no logic to ending the contests. On his best day, he said, he killed 14 coyotes, and has come home with his share of prizes.

Wright, who runs a website titled California Coyote Hunting, said he receives regular calls for help from ranchers whose cattle and chickens are menaced by coyotes.

He offers his hunting services for free and makes jerky from coyote meat.

“It is never about the money or prizes,” he added. “For me, it is about getting out in the field and friendly contests among other hunters.”