At its meeting on Tuesday, the board had scheduled a vote on the county’s annual renewal of its contract with Wildlife Services, a federal program that kills tens of thousands of native wild animals in California every year. But on a citizens’ request submitted by local wildlife rehabilitator Monte Merrick, the board decided to remove the renewal item from its consent calendar, delaying it at least another month as the county considers the issues raised by Merrick and the coalition.

“I am elated that the board has agreed to consider whether to renew its contract with Wildlife Services,” said Merrick. “Wildlife Services is increasingly controversial and there are better options to address wildlife conflicts.”

The coalition groups sent a formal letter asking the county to undertake an environmental review and ensure proper protections — as required under California state law — prior to hiring Wildlife Services to kill any additional wildlife. Last year, in response...
to a similar letter from the Animal Legal Defense Fund, Sonoma County’s Board of Supervisors opted not to renew the county’s contract with Wildlife Services and is now conducting a review of its wildlife policies. Marin County cancelled its contract with Wildlife Services 14 years ago and implemented a nonlethal predator-control program. As a result the county has seen a 62 percent decrease in livestock predation at one-third of the former cost.

Since 2000 Wildlife Services has spent a billion taxpayer dollars to kill a million coyotes and other predators across the nation. The excessive killing continues unchecked despite extensive peer-reviewed science showing that reckless destruction of native predators leads to broad ecological devastation. The indiscriminate methods used by Wildlife Services have killed more than 50,000 “nontarget” animals in the past decade, including endangered condors and bald eagles. The program recently released data showing that it killed over 4 million animals during fiscal year 2013 using a variety of methods, including steel-jaw leghold and body-crushing traps and wire snares. These devices maim and trap animals, who then may take several days to die. In 1998 California voters banned several of these methods, including leghold traps.

“Humboldt County has a chance to a leader in California wildlife management by eliminating their contract with Wildlife Services,” said Stephen Wells, executive director of the Animal Legal Defense Fund. “Nonlethal predator control has proven to be more humane, more cost-efficient, and more effective — it’s simply the right thing to do for the county.”

“We are glad to see that Humboldt County is pushing the ‘pause’ button on its relationship with Wildlife Services,” said Tim Ream of the Center for Biological Diversity. “We hope that the county will do the wise thing and terminate its relationship with Wildlife Services altogether.”

“Humboldt County has an opportunity to do what’s right here by reviewing their contract with Wildlife Services and shifting towards a nonlethal program that is ecologically, economically and ethically justifiable,” said Camilla Fox, Project Coyote founder and executive director, who helped develop Marin’s nonlethal program. “We pledge our assistance to the county toward this end and urge the Board of Supervisors to emulate the successful Marin County Livestock and Wildlife Protection Program that provides non-lethal assistance to ranchers.”

“The last thing the county that is home to such special places as the Lost Coast and Redwood National Park should be doing is allowing Wildlife Services to trap and kill its native wildlife,” said Elly Pepper, an NRDC wildlife advocate. “Using nonlethal methods to balance its incomparable natural beauty with its critters is a much better use of county residents’ money.”

“It is time to put aside the unchecked assumption that wildlife conflicts can only be solved via Wildlife Services’ draconian, outdated killing methods,” said Tara Zuardo, wildlife attorney at the Animal Welfare Institute. “We salute Humboldt County for stepping back to reevaluate its options — a move that will hopefully lead to more humane, less costly and more effective methods of wildlife management.”