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Coyote in Bolinas, Marin County | Photo: Nathan Forget/Flickr/Creative Commons License

Groups Sue NorCal County Over Work With Federal Wildlife Agency

A coalition of wildlife protection groups filed a lawsuit against Mendocino County on Tuesday, charging that the county's contract with a controversial federal wildlife agency violates state environmental laws.

The suit, filed in the Superior Court of California in Mendocino County, claims that the county failed to submit its \$142,356 contract with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services division to proper environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act. Under the terms of the contract, Wildlife Services kills hundreds of coyotes, foxes, bears, and other animals in Mendocino County each year, without assessing the environmental impact of its work as required under state law.

The groups had urged the county not to renew its contract with Wildlife Services in June, but their pleas went unheeded. Statewide, Wildlife Services kills approximately 80,000 wild animals in California alone, mainly on behalf of agricultural interests.

The groups filing suit are the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Biological Diversity, Project Coyote, and the Animal Welfare Institute.

Wildlife Services has come under increasing fire as both its methods and the ethics of certain of its staff members have come under scrutiny. For example, Wildlife Services trapper Jamie Olson attracted the widespread ire of online wildlife activists after he posted photos of his dogs attacking coyotes who had been immobilized in steel-jaw leghold traps. (See <http://tinyurl.com/omk7da6> for the upsetting photos.)

More broadly, the Wildlife Services agency has faced mounting criticism for methods critics call wasteful and counterproductive, such as using unattended traps and poison bait stations to kill target animals. According to critics, Wildlife Services' accidental death toll includes 50,000 non-target animals ranging from family pets to protected species such as golden eagles and California condors.

In 2013, wildlife groups successfully persuaded Sonoma County, just south of Mendocino, to end its contract with Wildlife Services. Marin County terminated its Wildlife Services contract 15 years ago, and has seen both its predator damage to livestock and its costs drop after implementing more sensible livestock protection programs.