



By Tom Knudson
tknudson@sacbee.com

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Davis cuts ties with Wildlife Services over coyote killings

One after another, residents of the quiet college town of Davis stood before the City Council, expressing outrage over the recent killing of five coyotes – four of them pups – by a little-known branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture called Wildlife Services.

After listening for about an hour Tuesday, council members voted unanimously to terminate the city's contract with the federal agency and develop more nonlethal alternatives for dealing with wildlife.

"It's very clear to me that this contract is a complete mess," said Davis Mayor Joe Krovoza. "We are contracting with a group. We are paying them money, and they don't begin to share our values remotely."

The council's action came less than a week after the Davis Enterprise reported an employee of the agency had killed the coyotes in June on a golf course on the edge of town. Carol Bannerman, a spokeswoman for Wildlife Services, told the Enterprise the coyotes were killed because there had been concern about aggression toward joggers and pets in the area.

But in a community that prides itself on protecting the environment, the action drew anger and concern from residents and city officials who were not consulted or informed about the killing.

"I was shocked that our city officials weren't notified, that we didn't have a big 'to go to' plan," Davis resident Cayce Wallace told the council. "The Davis coyotes don't need management. They do certainly need a (wildlife) coexisting plan."

Earlier this year, a series of articles in The Bee reported the agency's predator control activities across the West are often excessive, indiscriminate, out of sync with science and carried out with little or no public input.

Krovoza cited those articles in his motion to end the city's financial ties with the agency.

"One would think a story like this comes out ... and maybe they talk to their employees ... (and



A coyote hangs dead in a government neck snare in Nevada in a photo shot by a former trapper for USDA Wildlife Services. Snares are used extensively by Wildlife Services and have killed more than 150,000 animals since 2006.

be a little bit more sensitive to the communities that they are serving. And that hasn't happened. I think they've got a deaf ear to what's going on."

Wildlife Services officials were invited to Tuesday evening's emergency meeting, but did not attend.

"I came because I was hoping to speak directly to people from the USDA ironically named Wildlife Services," said Davis resident Christopher Cassels.

Wildlife Services did not respond to requests for comment from The Bee.

"Government answers to ... the fearful, the loud ... the complainer," Davis resident Alan Miller told the City Council. "The rest of us, who never saw this coming, had our will taken away by those who fear wild coyotes."

John McNerney, wildlife resource specialist for Davis, said the coyotes were shot at the Wildhorse Golf Club on the northeast side of town near a buffer zone designed to protect wildlife. He said he had not been consulted.

"I'm extremely frustrated with the lack of communication," said McNerney. "I would certainly think I should be part of that decision."

The killings occurred, the Enterprise reported, after the golf course contacted Wildlife Services with concerns for joggers and pets.

Bannerman told the Enterprise the action was necessary. "Our staff went on location and identified the coyotes in that specific area that did show a level of being habituated toward people and very forward in a way that you wouldn't anticipate from a coyote," she said.

But McNerney, who lives in the area, said he had watched the coyotes for months before they were shot and noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

"The behavior I observed was very typical," he said. "I observed no aggressive behavior. The distance they kept from people was a safe distance that didn't leave me to have any cause for concern."

After the incident, Krovoza and other officials scrambled to discover how and why the coyotes were killed and who paid for it. Eventually, they discovered the city helps support Wildlife Services through a contract managed through the city of West Sacramento.

Council members severed the Davis portion of that contract. "I was pretty disgusted by this action," said Davis council member Lucas Frerichs. "It was an absolute breakdown in communication."

Krovoza added: "It appears to me that it's permissible under this contract for private residents in Davis who might have a possum in their backyard to call (Wildlife Services) unbeknownst to us, have them come out and decide that they want that possum killed. And we have no say in that whatsoever, and we're paying for it. And that is just completely upside down."

McNerney said he enjoyed seeing the family of coyotes on regular jogs through the area with his girlfriend and their two 9-year-old boys.

"All of us are deeply saddened," McNerney said. "We watched the puppies grow. Our boys were very excited. It was very difficult for me to explain to them what happened. They look at me like, 'Well, aren't you the one who supposed to be helping take care of the urban wildlife?' It's very sad and frustrating for me."

The council's action drew praise from Project Coyote, a Bay Area environmental group that works to promote nonlethal strategies for living with predators.

"We commend Mayor Krovoza and the City Council for their unanimous decision," said Camilla Fox, the group's executive director. "Project Coyote has pledged our expertise and educational tools to help chart this new and sensible course for the city of Davis."