EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a recent investigative series, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Tom Knudson of the Sacramento Bee exposed the inhumane, environmentally damaging, and fiscally irresponsible killing practices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services program. Through interviews and the Freedom of Information Act, Knudson found that the program’s practices and culture are profoundly out of line with both sound environmental policy and fiscal responsibility. This document summarizes his findings.

Key Findings from Tom Knudson’s Investigation of Wildlife Services¹

- Since 2000, Wildlife Services has mistakenly killed more than 50,000 non-target animals not considered threats to agriculture, using leg-hold traps, wire snares, and poisons. Among these animals are federally protected species such as golden and bald eagles, as well as over 1,100 dogs.
- Since 1987, at least 18 Wildlife Services employees and several members of the public have been exposed to cyanide upon inadvertently triggering M-44s, spring-loaded devices that are intended to poison coyotes with sodium cyanide.
- Many people have been injured during the course of Wildlife Services’ aerial gunning operations, and ten people have died in crashes since 1979.
- Scientific data has revealed that Wildlife Services’ slaughter of native carnivores, which has ostensibly been undertaken in an effort to protect livestock and big game species, is altering ecosystems in ways that diminish biodiversity, degrade habitat and invite disease.
- According to Wildlife Services’ own records, the agency has accidentally killed animals from more than 150 species since 2000—and insiders have indicated that agency records dramatically underestimate the impact that the “killing agency” and its practices have had on non-target species.
- Over the course of 8 years, Wildlife Services has spent approximately $550,000 and has brutally killed 967 coyotes and 45 mountain lions on just one project in northwest Nevada in the name of protecting mule deer, a big game species. After nearly a decade of needless spending and slaughter, mule deer populations have not improved.
- Indiscriminately killing coyotes to protect game species is a misguided and ineffective practice. Removing native carnivores from an ecosystem results in exploding populations of rodents and other small mammals that carry disease and compete with game species for food. It also leads, ultimately, to larger and smarter coyote populations.
- Scientists, former Wildlife Services employees, and others acknowledge that the agency’s killing practices are ineffective and can cause chain reactions of adverse environmental consequences.

¹ See Tom Knudson, Wildlife Services’ deadly force opens Pandora’s box of environmental problems, SACRAMENTO BEE, Apr. 30, 2012, at 1A; Tom Knudson, The killing agency: Wildlife Services’ brutal methods leave a trail of animal death, SACRAMENTO BEE, Apr. 29,
Three coyotes caught in leg-hold traps await death in this photo taken by a Wildlife Services trapper in Nevada. The coyote in the foreground is attacked by the trapper’s dogs. Wildlife Services captures and kills 10,000 to 12,000 animals using leg-hold traps each year. As Knudson explains, “[n]o tool in Wildlife Services’ arsenal kills more nonselectively—or slowly—than the leg-hold trap. Since 2000, more than 90 species of wildlife have died by mistake in agency traps, including pronghorn antelope, mule deer, river otters, swift foxes, badgers, porcupines and federally protected bald eagles, government records show. But whether animals are caught accidentally or not, they often struggle for days and die of exposure, injuries and other causes long before a trapper returns to the site.”

As Knudson’s series reveals, Wildlife Services and its inhumane, ineffective practices are in need of drastic reform. We ask our legislators to stop the use of taxpayer dollars for the indiscriminate slaughter of America’s native predators and non-target species.

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2 A number of recommendations are discussed in greater detail in Knudson’s series. See Tom Knudson, Suggestions in changing Wildlife Services range from new practices to outright bans, SACRAMENTO BEE, May 6, 2012, at 1A.