

# San Francisco Chronicle

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Published:  
Monday, June 1, 2015

From SFGate  
(<http://www.sfgate.com/science/article/Wildlife-groups-take-aim-at-lethal-control-of-6296956.php#item-39786>)

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Rancher Francis Cornett uses Great Pyrenees dogs to guard his flocks of sheep near Petaluma as a form of nonlethal predator control.  
Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

## Wildlife groups take aim at lethal control of predators

Federal trapper Chris Brennan is the go-to guy in Mendocino County when sheep or cattle are being threatened by predators, which, it is generally acknowledged, don't stand much of a chance when he is on the case.

He is an excellent tracker, an expert with snares and other traps and a pretty good shot. He has the added benefit, say wildlife advocates and quite a few neighbors, of being a merciless killer.

Brennan, a 55-year-old trapper for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services, has killed coyotes, mountain lions, bears, skunks, raccoons, bobcats and, by his own estimate, 400 dogs.

"He represents a kind of mind-set, a culture," said Camilla Fox, the executive director of Project

Coyote, a wildlife advocacy organization that is calling for government support and training in nonlethal methods and techniques for controlling natural predators, and for widespread adoption of programs like one that has succeeded in Marin County for 15 years.

Brennan and his fellow trappers are the target of a nationwide campaign by Project Coyote and other wildlife conservation organizations to stop what they characterize as indiscriminate killing of wildlife by a rogue agency that still lives by the outdated slogan "the only good predator is a dead predator."

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## CONSERVATION GROUPS SUE

The latest sortie occurred in February when five conservation groups sued the Department of Agriculture for the “wanton killing” of wildlife in Idaho. They want the agency to promote nonlethal methods of control, including guardian dogs, fencing, hazing techniques, night corrals and lambing sheds.

Idaho is notorious for using aerial gunning, neck snares, foothold traps and poison to kill coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, foxes, badgers and other species, according to the suit. The dirty work is mostly done by trappers who have contracts with the department’s Wildlife Services branch.

Wildlife advocates say this kind of blood lust isn’t isolated to the Rocky Mountains. It is happening all over the western United States, including many parts of California.

Project Coyote and four other groups filed a lawsuit last year, challenging a proposed new contract between Mendocino County and Wildlife Services because of what Fox claims is a kill-first, ask-questions-later approach energetically employed by Brennan. Under pressure, the county agreed in a recent settlement to consider nonlethal methods and look into the environmental impacts of controlling predators before renewing its contract, which expires June 30. Still, there appears to be little support in the county for dropping the federal service.

Reached by phone, Brennan said he is “not allowed to talk to the press.”

Travis Kocurek, spokesman for the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, which oversees the wildlife management program, defended Brennan’s use of lethal force in a prepared statement. He said the agency researches nonlethal predator-control methods, and that



*A bobcat is caught in a leghold trap, which is commonly used by USDA Wildlife Services.  
Photo: David Pettit, Courtesy Project Coyote*

trappers like Brennan know about and use the techniques when appropriate. Besides, he said, trappers may not kill mountain lions, bears, beavers, deer, elk, turkeys, bobcats, feral swine or gray squirrels unless the affected landowner first obtains a depredation permit from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“As a federal leader in resolving human-wildlife conflict, Wildlife Services uses a responsible and science-based approach to address damage and problems caused by wildlife,” Kocurek wrote in an e-mail. “In cases where nonlethal methods are impractical or have been unsuccessfully implemented in California, we may pursue lethal removal.”

Paul Trouette, a Mendocino County Fish and Game commissioner, said guardian dogs, fencing and other nonlethal

methods don’t work well in Mendocino County because of the steep, rugged terrain. Many predators climb fences, he said, and coyotes and cougars have been known to run sheep and other prey into them for easy kills.

“I’m always going to go for nonlethal, but sometimes it isn’t an option,” said Trouette, who is also president of the Mendocino County Blacktail Deer Association, a nonprofit that protects Columbian black-tailed deer herds in California. Besides, he said, “it’s like \$1,000 to buy a Great Pyrenees, and then there are vet bills. They do a very good job, but if you only have one or two of these dogs, the coyotes will use younger pack members to distract the guard dogs while the others go after the sheep.”

## SHOOT, SHOVEL AND SHUT UP

The issue has exacerbated tensions between ranchers and conservationists. Livestock owners in the far northern part of the state have threatened to employ the “three S’s” – shoot, shovel and shut up – when confronted with efforts to protect wolves, coyotes and other “vermin,” according to state wildlife officials, ranchers and conservation groups.

There are as many as 700,000 coyotes in the state, estimates the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Mountain lions are similarly abundant, and both predators kill a lot of livestock, which are commodities that contribute to the state and local economy, according to the California Cattlemen’s Association.

Federal trappers kill as many as 80,000 animals in California a year, including close to 5,000 coyotes, according to Wildlife Services charts. Last year, agency employees killed 2.7 million animals nationwide, including wolves, coyotes, bears, mountain lions, beavers, foxes and other animals deemed pests, the federal statistics show.

“That’s 7,400 animals every day nationally,” Fox said, noting that nontarget animals, including eagles, are also caught in traps.

There is plenty of support in Mendocino County for Brennan, the federal trapper, though not always among his own neighbors.

Phil Gravier and Lawrence Tells, who live near property Brennan oversees, sought restraining orders and wrote letters or filed complaints with the sheriff’s department, Department of Fish and Wildlife and other agencies after Brennan allegedly killed their pet dogs.

## KILLING DOGS

Another neighbor, David O’Leary, also said Brennan has a penchant for killing dogs.

“Mr. Brennan may be an effective county trapper, but he is also quite well known for being inordinately fond of and proficient at shooting dogs,” O’Leary wrote in a legal brief after Brennan sued him over roaming cows.

Brennan calls his spread, which is 20 miles north of Laytonville, “Dead Dog Ranch,” according to Wildlife Services documents obtained by Project Coyote. Brennan admitted during a 2009 hearing in Mendocino County Superior Court on Gravier’s request for a restraining order that he killed “close to 400” dogs over the previous 10 years.

Despite the complaints from neighbors and wildlife advocates, Brennan has never been charged with a crime or been found guilty of wrongdoing.

Brennan and his defenders argue that the dogs were almost all stray pit bulls or other purportedly vicious breeds roaming in packs and attacking livestock. Far from being pets, he claims, most of them were guard dogs that had been abandoned by drug dealers and marijuana growers in the county.

“Chris is well respected in his field among clientele and the ranching community,” said Trouette, the county fish and game commissioner. “He is an expert in trapping, tracking and in problems with nuisance pests. He is excellent at giving technical assistance to landowners and responds quickly to calls.”

But Fox said it isn’t Brennan’s skills – or even his apparent relish at doing the dirty work – that are at issue as much as the fact that he is typical of many federal trappers who rarely, if ever, consider nonlethal means.

“I wish I could say that he was the only one,” said Fox, who cited the cases of a federal wildlife specialist in Wyoming, who posted photographs of his dogs mauling a trapped coyote, and an Arizona trapper, who snared his neighbor’s dog in a steel trap, forcing it to try to chew its own leg off. “These guys out there whacking wildlife are not getting any training in nonlethal methods and techniques. This culture of cruelty that pervades the agency is deeply ingrained and resistant to change.”

## FEDERAL SYSTEM

The reason for this is an entrenched system of killing that is supported by cattle and sheep ranchers, hunters and farmers – the primary beneficiaries of the contracts counties sign with the Agriculture Department for the right to use federal trappers, said Bob Crabtree, a wildlife ecologist and research professor at the University of Montana.

In 2014, Mendocino County signed a \$142,356 contract with Wildlife Services. The money, a portion of which is paid by the federal government, covers salaries, vehicles, equipment and supplies, and the services of a wildlife specialist. The government trappers are deployed by county Agriculture Department officials at the request of citizens.

“The force behind all this is the ag industry” which “fights nonlethal control,” said Crabtree, who is on the science advisory board for Project Coyote. “It’s a Faustian business model. Taxpayer dollars are being mixed with private dollars, creating a lot of money for this killing machine. It can’t be justified economically, ethically or ecologically.”

The culture exists, according to conservationists, despite the fact that there is a nonlethal model in Marin



A Great Pyrenees dog, right, protects Francis Cornett's sheep from predators in a pasture.  
Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

County that has proved to work. In 2000, the county adopted the Marin Livestock and Wildlife Protection Program, which essentially used the money once paid to federal trappers to help ranchers build fences, night corrals and lambing sheds, and to purchase guardian dogs.

The movement was inspired by a furor in 1996 over the proposed use of livestock protection collars — containing poison — on sheep in western Marin. At that time, coyotes were killing hundreds of lambs and ewes every year. The poison killed the coyotes when they attacked.

#### SWITCH TO GUARD DOGS

The county got serious about the issue in 1998 when California banned the use of steel-jawed traps and poisonous collars. Most sheep ranchers in Marin — some two dozen of them — purchased guardian dogs, which naturally bond with sheep and goats, and aggressively protect them. Ranchers credit the dogs with reducing predation at a time when the coyote population has been growing.

“If I didn’t have the guard dogs I probably wouldn’t be in business,” said Francis Cornett, who has 17 dogs protecting 2,300 sheep in the Tomales area of Marin.

Cornett gets \$3,000 a year from the county for dog food and fencing. He believes lethal control is sometimes necessary — he lost 35 sheep this past year to coyotes — but only after other deterrents are employed. “There are guys who don’t have dogs,” he said, “and they lose much more.”

The program also helped pay for fences, electrification, noisemakers, lights and motion sensors— all at one-third the cost of predator control under the Wildlife Services program, according to county agricultural officials.

#### ‘INDISCRIMINATELY’ KILLING

Proponents of the system weren’t given much hope during a May 5 public hearing in Mendocino County, where the general consensus among those who testified seemed to be that coyotes and mountain

lions would, if not controlled with weaponry, stalk schoolyards and pick off children during lunch hour.

“What they think is, ‘these people are trying to tell us that we can never kill a coyote.’ Nobody is saying that,” said Keli Hendricks, the predator-friendly ranching coordinator for Project Coyote. “What we are saying is that to spend taxpayer dollars on a government trapper to go out and indiscriminately kill wildlife is inefficient, ineffective and counterproductive.”

For the sake of wildlife, Crabtree said, it is imperative that Mendocino County officials look at the evidence.

“Here is a chance to do what was done in Marin County,” Crabtree said. “It can happen if they just give it a chance. But instead of doing that they say what works in Marin won’t work in Mendocino. That’s not right. It would work just fine.”