

PROJECT COYOTE

F O S T E R I N G C O E X I S T E N C E



August 5, 2016

Nevada Board of Wildlife Commissioners
1100 Valley Road
Reno, NV 89512

Send via email: sscourby@ndow.org

Re: Proposed Policy (reference #-NRS 501.100, 501.105) addressing “organized contests and the take of wildlife”

Dear Commissioners:

On behalf of Project Coyote and our Nevada supporters, we offer these comments regarding the proposed policy (reference #-NRS 501.100, 501.105) addressing “organized contests and the take of wildlife” in Nevada.

In the proposed policy, the Commission supports contests that:

- *Focus on the ethical, personal skill necessary to the contest.*

RESPONSE: Modern methods with electronic calls and super sophisticated weaponry minimize “personal skills”. How can any wildlife killing contest be deemed ethical? The Commission must define what constitutes “ethical personal skills” for wildlife killing contests. The assurance of “ethical, personal skill” seems impossible to achieve in the context of a wildlife killing contest. We note that the highly respected Boone & Crocket Club opposes wildlife killing contests as being antithetical to ethical sportsmanship.

- *Encourage participation in wildlife-related activities and outdoor traditions.*

RESPONSE: Where is the evidence that wildlife killing contests are an established “outdoor tradition?” And even if there is such a tradition, what is the justification for perpetuating the tradition? Similar “traditions” such as cock fighting, dog fighting have been banned for being unethical. What makes wildlife killing contests different?

- *Follow all relevant wildlife laws, regulations, and ordinances*

RESPONSE: For regulated species this is a given expectation and legal requirement. But what rules would contestants be legally compelled to follow for killing contests of unregulated species, such as coyotes?

- *Adhere to the principles of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation*

RESPONSE: The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (NAMWC) establishes wildlife as a “public trust resource.” “Wildlife” means all wildlife and the “public” means everyone and all “interests” (not just hunters), and all future generations. How can wildlife killing contests be reconciled with the Commission’s public trust obligations?

The NAMWC requires a “legitimate purpose” for taking wildlife. No legitimate purpose is served by competitive killing of wildlife. The Commission openly admits this by stating: “the wildlife management profession does not generally recognize the use of contests as a tool with substantial wildlife management effect.” This tenet alone should justify a complete ban of wildlife killing contests.

The NAMWC prohibits the “marketing of game.” How is offering cash and prizes for the dead bodies of wildlife not the establishment of a “market” for wildlife? The only way a killing contest could meet this standard would be one that offered no money or prizes.

The NAMWC requires wildlife policy to be based on and consistent with the best science. There is no valid science in support of wildlife killing contests (PLEASE SEE LETTER BELOW SIGNED BY 50 SCIENTISTS).

- *Encourage respect for the wildlife pursued, attention to the traditions exercised, and enjoyment of wildlife resources.*

RESPONSE: Competitive killing of wildlife is antithetical to the concepts of “respect”, “enjoyment”, and “traditional uses” of wildlife. We challenge the Commission to demonstrate otherwise.

- *The Commission does not support contests that glorify the death of wildlife through insensitive photographs, inappropriate behaviors, or contests that simply enumerate take.*

RESPONSE: How does the awarding of cash or prizes not “glorify” the death of wildlife killed in a contest even if all the photographs are not “insensitive”? We believe that the very act of striving to kill more wildlife than all other contestants in order to win a prize constitutes “inappropriate behavior.” The very nature of a “contest” requires winners and losers. There are few ways to establish winners

without “enumerating take,” which is the measure of success in most, if not all, wildlife killing contests. How is the Commission’s admonition of these unsavory attributes of wildlife killing contests going to stop such contests? What is the fine for contests that don’t follow these rules of engagement?

- *The Commission does not support contests that intentionally violate wildlife laws or intentionally conceal inadvertent violations of wildlife law.*

RESPONSE: How can this be enforced?

- *The Commission does not support contests that do not use all parts and edible portions of the wildlife taken.*

RESPONSE: How is “edible” defined? Are there species of wildlife that are considered “inedible?” If so, these need to be specifically identified. Otherwise, how can this provision possibly be enforced? And how can the killing of inedible wildlife be considered a “legitimate purpose” for taking wildlife?

- *The Commission does not support contests that are blatantly disrespectful to the wildlife being pursued.*

RESPONSE: This prohibition serves to define the basic nature of all wildlife killing contests—“blatantly disrespectful.” Under what conditions would the wanton killing of wildlife for personal glory and prizes be “respectful?”

Based on the aforementioned questions and comments regarding the Commission’s proposed policy, we believe there is solid justification for the outright banning of wildlife killing contests. Because coyote killing contests are the most prevalent and controversial form of wildlife killing contest in Nevada and because the indiscriminate killing of predators is not a legitimate, science-based wildlife management tool as outlined in the letter below signed by 50 preeminent scientists that provides peer-reviewed science, we urge the Commission to consider starting with a ban of coyote killing contests.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions or if you would like to discuss further. I can be reached directly at 415-690-0338 or at cfox@projectcoyote.org



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To Whom It May Concern,

On behalf of Project Coyote's Science Advisory Board and the undersigned scientists we express our support for the prohibition of wildlife killing contests (WKC), derbies and tournaments, including prohibition of contests targeting coyotes, which are promoted throughout the United States.

The most general reason to prohibit WKC is that hunters and wildlife managers believe, as a community, that killing animals without an adequate reason is unjustified and unsportsmanlike. Killing an animal for a prize or trophy constitutes killing without an adequate reason. Inasmuch as WKC are primarily motivated by killing for a prize or trophy, they are wrong.

Some advocates of WKC argue that they are important for achieving management objectives for other species, especially game species. There is no credible evidence that indiscriminate killing of coyotes or other predators effectively serves any genuine interest in managing other species. If leaders in the hunting and wildlife management community believe that WKC, in general, serve important objectives, then the principles of wildlife management mandate that (1) these objectives be articulated and vetted by the best-available science, and (2) some reasonable, science-based case be made to justify a WKC as an appropriate means for achieving these objectives. In the absence of such an evaluation, WKC should be prohibited.

Advocates of WKC might argue that they – when directed at predators, especially coyotes – are an important means for realizing one or both of these objectives: (1) decrease the loss of livestock to depredation, and (2) increase the abundance of prey species in the interest of maximizing hunting success by humans.

With respect to objective (1), a great deal of science has been developed on how to effectively manage depredations, including both lethal and non-lethal methods. Lessons from that science include:

- (i) Indiscriminate killing is ineffective and it is plausible, perhaps likely, that when associated with a WKC it would lead to increased risk of depredations. A primary reason for this concern is that only some, often only a few, individual predators participate in depredation. Indiscriminate and “pre-emptive” killing of predators associated with WKC can lead to the disruption of predators’ social structure and foraging ecology in ways that increase the likelihood of depredations. In hunted (exploited) coyote populations, for example, the number of surviving pups that must be fed by the alpha parents and the number of

transient individuals may increase. These factors may predispose more coyotes to depredate livestock.

- (ii) The indiscriminate killing associated with a WKC does not target: (a) the offending predator, (b) the site where depredation has occurred, and (c) the time when depredation has occurred. This renders WKC's ineffective as a means of depredation control.

While managing to reduce the loss of livestock is a common goal for all stakeholders, WKC's do not contribute to this goal and may work against it.

With respect to objective (2), a large body of science indicates that killing predators, especially under circumstances associated with WKC's, is not a reliable means of increasing ungulate abundance. The circumstances most likely to result in increased ungulate abundance are also the circumstances most likely to impair important ecosystem benefits and services that predators provide. Even when predators are killed to the point of impairing the ecosystem services, there is still no assurance that ungulate abundance will increase. The reason being is that ungulate abundance is frequently limited by factors other than predators – factors such as habitat and climate.

Beyond objectives (1) and (2), which focus on affecting game populations and livestock depredations, lies a need to better recognize and celebrate the predators' valuable contribution to the health and vitality of our ecosystems. For example, predators serve human interests through beneficial effects such as rodent control and disease prevention and promoting diverse plant communities and soil fertility. Thus, reduction of the distribution and numbers of apex predators can have detrimental ecological effects.

Some advocates of WKC's might also believe that killing coyotes is vitally important for preventing coyote populations from growing out of control. This concern is unjustified. Science demonstrates that unexploited coyote populations self-regulate their numbers by means of dominant individuals defending non-overlapping territories and suppressing subordinate pack members from breeding.

The Boone and Crockett Club was founded by Theodore Roosevelt in 1887 "over the concerns that we might someday lose our hunting privileges and the wildlife populations for future generations"¹, is still considered one of the most respected sportsmen's institutions in North America. The Club "does not support programs, contests or competitions that directly place a bounty on game animals by awarding cash or expensive prizes for the taking of wildlife"² because WKC's contravene the club's "fair-chase" motto.

Thank you for considering our concerns on this important wildlife conservation issue.

¹ From B&C's website: http://www.boone-crockett.org/join/associates_faq.asp?area=join

² See: http://www.boone-crockett.org/bgRecords/position_statements.asp?area=bgRecords

Respectfully submitted,

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Appendix A. Additional Literature Cited

Here we provide additional scientific explanation (with citations) for two ideas expressed in this letter.

(1) Some advocates of wildlife killing contests (WKC) believe they are necessary or beneficial for effective management of livestock depredation. We indicated that WKC are unlikely to have this effect. The reason why is that most individual predators do not participate in livestock depredations (Gipson 1975; Knowlton et al. 1999; Sacks et al. 1999a, 1999b; Linnell et al. 1999; Stahl and Vandel 2001; Blejwas et al. 2002; Treves et al. 2002; Treves and Naughton-Treves 2005). Consequently, effective management of depredation requires (1) targeting the offending individual(s), and (2) intervening close to the site where the depredations occurred as well as responding in a timely manner (Gipson 1975; Sacks et al. 1999a, 1999b; Smith et al. 2000; Bangs and Shivik 2001). WKC do not represent the kind of targeted effort required for effective management of livestock depredations.

Moreover, indiscriminate killing of predators is likely to exacerbate risks to livestock. The reason is that killing social carnivores like coyotes (and wolves) can lead to the disruption of predators' social and foraging ecology in ways that increase the number of transient individuals (Bjorge and Gunson 1985; Haber 1996; Treves and Naughton-Treves 2005; Brainerd et al. 2008). These transient individuals that have not been acculturated (aversively conditioned) to living in areas with livestock may be more likely to kill livestock. Studies by USDA's Wildlife Services clearly indicate that many, if not most, depredations are inflicted by the breeders (i.e., alphas) in coyote social groups (Knowlton et al. 1999; Sacks et al. 1999b). Even if the offending individuals are removed, they can be replaced by other members of the social group or from populations outside the area where the WKC is occurring. In some cases, this can also increase reproductive performance in coyotes (Crabtree and Sheldon 1999; Knowlton et al. 1999). Scientific evidence is increasingly suggesting that harvesting predators can exacerbate losses to livestock (Collins et al. 2002; Treves et al. 2010; Peebles et al. 2013; Wielgus and Peebles 2014).

(2) Some advocates of wildlife killing contests believe they are necessary or beneficial for increasing the abundance of ungulate populations. We had indicated in our letter that WKC are unlikely to have that effect. The reason why is two fold:

- (i) Killing predators cannot result in increased ungulate abundance in cases where the ungulate population is not limited by predators, but is instead limited by other factors,

such as climatic conditions or food availability (Sæther 1997; Forchhammer et al. 1998; Coulson et al. 2000; Parker et al. 2009). Without careful study, the claim that killing predators will improve wild ungulate populations is simply an unsupported assumption. Moreover, scientists are not good at understanding the conditions that cause a population to be limited by predators as opposed to other factors (Vucetich et al. 2005; Wilmers et al. 2006). For example, an experimental study in Idaho (Hurley et al. 2011) found that annual removal of coyotes was not an effective method to increase mule deer populations because coyote removal increased neonate fawn survival only under particular combinations of prey densities and weather conditions.

(ii) Even in cases where predators do limit prey abundance, human-caused mortality (HCM) could only lead to an increase in prey abundance if the rate of HCM was sufficient to result in a significant reduction in predator abundance. Human-caused mortality is not a reliable means of reducing coyote abundance unless the rate of HCM exceeds 70% (Connolly and Lonhurst 1975). It is difficult to imagine that any set of WKC's would be intense enough or frequent enough to result in that rate of HCM.

Finally, the interest of some advocates of WKC's (i.e., increased ungulate abundance) is antithetical to good natural resource management practices in cases where increased ungulate abundances present a risk of overbrowsing (e.g., Côté et al. 2004).

Thank you for allowing us to further explain ourselves. If additional explanation on this or any other topic would be of value, please let us know. We would be eager to provide any such explanations.

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