
San Francisco Chronicle

By Peter Firmrite
Published: Aug. 22, 2018
Updated: Aug. 23, 2018

From SF Chronicle
<https://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/Some-California-counties-reject-U-S-policy-of-13172704.php>



Photo: California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Some California counties reject U.S. policy of killing predatory wildlife

A growing number of Northern California counties where hunting and ranching predominate are cutting ties with the federal agency that traps and kills predatory animals, marking a possible turning point in the battle by conservation groups to halt the rampant killing of coyotes, mountain lions and other native carnivores.

Under threat of a lawsuit by animal protection groups, Siskiyou County announced last Thursday that it would terminate its contract in 90 days with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services, which provides trappers to counties for predator control.

The actions were made in response to a nationwide campaign by conservation organizations to stop what they characterize as the indiscriminate killing of wildlife by a rogue agency that still lives by the outdated slogan, "The only good predator is a dead predator."

"I'm hopeful this victory marks the turn of the tide for California's wildlife," said Collette Adkins, a biologist and attorney at the Center for Biological

Diversity, one of eight organizations that have been putting pressure on agricultural departments across the country. "Siskiyou County is smart to seek out an alternative to this ineffective, cruel and harmful wildlife-killing program."

Siskiyou County Agriculture Commissioner James Smith could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Siskiyou was the sixth county in California to stop or at least temporarily suspend agreements with Wildlife Services. The county's move followed Shasta County's decision last month to stop using federal trappers.

A trail camera in 2015 captured photos of two adult wolves and five pups in Siskiyou County. The U.S.

Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services policy is to trap and kill predators.

Tanya Espinosa, public affairs officer for the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said Wildlife Services trappers use nonlethal predator-control methods more than 90 percent of the time. She said about 75 percent of the department's research budget is spent on the development of nonlethal wildlife management tools and techniques.

"USDA's Wildlife Services provides expert federal leadership to responsibly manage one of our nation's most valued resources – our wildlife," said Espinosa, adding that federal trappers are intricately involved in controlling the spread of the invasive rodent called nutria and keeping track of gray wolves in California. "Providing property owners with wildlife damage management assistance delivered by trained staff minimizes the frustration caused by wildlife conflicts and promotes coexistence between people and wildlife populations as a whole."

The system is supported by cattle and sheep ranchers, hunters and farmers – the primary beneficiaries of the contracts counties sign with the Agriculture Department. The 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, agency officials said.

The issue is a big one in rural areas of California, where tensions between ranchers and conservationists are high, especially now that wolves have returned to the state and have been implicated in the deaths of ranchers' calves. Some residents of Siskiyou and other rural counties in Northern California 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 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, the California Cattlemen's Association says.

Every year in California, federal trappers are responsible for the deaths of some 80,000 animals, including close to 5,000 coyotes, according to Wildlife Services charts. More than 2 million animals are killed by the trappers nationwide, including wolves, coyotes, bears, mountain lions, beavers, foxes and other animals deemed pests, the federal statistics show.

The conservation groups say federal trappers killed more than 28,000 animals in Siskiyou over the past decade and 72,385 animals in Shasta over the past two years, including coyotes, mountain lions and black bears.

Camilla Fox, founder and executive director of Project Coyote, said the trappers used firearms, snares and traps to do their work and often inadvertently killed non-targeted animals like domestic dogs, cats and birds, including the protected tricolored blackbird.

One Mendocino trapper told officials a few years ago that he had killed 400 dogs, most of them guard dogs for marijuana plantations.

Because of the rampant deaths, Fox said, Marin and Sonoma counties dropped out of the federal program. Then in 2015, following a lawsuit by the conservation groups, Mendocino County agreed as part of the settlement to evaluate nonlethal predator control alternatives before it considers renewing a contract with Wildlife Services. The studies are still being conducted.

Monterey County, by court order, conducted an environmental review and has been given permission by county supervisors to re-up with the agency.

"People don't want native wild animals killed indiscriminately for the benefit of a narrow interest group ... so they are ending the contract and looking at nonlethal alternatives," Fox said. "Many nonlethal alternatives exist that effectively reduce, if not eliminate, conflicts between livestock and predators."

The alternative Fox has been pushing for all the counties is Marin County's Livestock and Wildlife Protection Program. In 2000, the county decided to use the money once paid to federal trappers to help ranchers build fences, night corrals and lambing sheds and 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 West Marin. At that time, coyotes were killing hundreds of lambs and ewes every year. The poison killed the coyotes when they attacked.

Most sheep ranchers in Marin – some two dozen of them – purchased guardian dogs, which naturally bond with sheep and goats, and aggressively protect them. The dogs reduced predation at a fraction of the cost of predator control under the Wildlife Services program, according to county agricultural officials.

Some cattlemen and supporters of wildlife services say guardian dogs, fencing and other nonlethal methods don't always work well and cost a lot of money, but Stephen Wells, executive director of the Animal Legal Defense Fund, said being humane is worth the cost.

"California residents deserve better than to have their tax dollars spent on the trapping, poisoning and shooting of innocent animals," he said.