

Supporting Wildlife Services

Purpose of Wildlife Services

The Wildlife Services (WS) program provides federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts and create a crucial balance for people and wildlife on the same land.

Wildlife management generally involves a partnership of federal, state and local government as well as institutions and landowners – WS is no different. The agency shares costs with cooperators, including federal and state wildlife and health agencies, transportation, agricultural and livestock producer associations and the public. WS is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. WS has the authority to assist in solving problems that are created when wildlife causes damage to agricultural property; feedlots; domestic livestock; civil aircraft; fish stock; commercial forestry, nursery and game animals; endangered species; and field crops, fruits and nuts. In addition, WS assists American industries; federal, state and local governments; and private citizens to help protect human health and safety at the workplace, at public sites and at American homes.

WS considers the well-being of the public and wildlife at all times. WS acts as a protective buffer, guarding not only resources but also wildlife and the environment when conflicts between humans and wildlife occur. When formulating control strategies, WS specialists consider protected or endangered animals, environmental impacts, the cost effectiveness of control methods and social and legal concerns. Control strategies may include the application of one or more techniques, and consideration is first given to non-lethal methods.

WS professionals provide biologically sound, effective and accountable solutions to wildlife problems. In all instances, WS programs are conducted to ensure no lasting negative impact on wildlife populations. WS professionals strive to educate the public and producers about the importance of using responsible strategies for living with wildlife.

Economic Losses due to Wildlife Depredation

Predators do prey on livestock, endangered species and pets or pose a threat to human health and safety. The most significant

predators of livestock are coyotes, foxes, bears, mountain lions and bobcats. *Coyotes are responsible for more damage than all other predators combined.* Feral dogs are the second most damaging predator on livestock.

All states have a wildlife management agency and nearly all have sufficient conflicts to have a cooperative agreement with WS. Federal and state governments work with county and predator districts to fund the overall damage management programs. WS has more than 2,500 cooperative agreements in place across the United States.



Photo: USDA/APHIS

Coyotes kill for a living, so in spite of the damage management programs, each year, predators kill millions of dollars worth of lambs, calves and goats. USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) documented an \$18.3 million loss of sheep and lambs to predators in 2004. Add cattle and calf losses to that figure and it jumps to \$111 million. Coyotes and dogs caused the majority of losses accounting for 60.5 percent in sheep, 13.3 percent in lambs, 51.1 percent in cattle and 11.5 percent in calves.

Absent predator management, losses would explode, driving family farms and ranches out of business.

Role of WS

Many people who suffer damage caused by wildlife do not have the ability to deal with the problem and become frustrated. Placing the responsibility for managing the damage caused by wild animals in the hands of professional wildlife biologists – like those employed by WS – ensures that responses to damage will be biologically sound and economically efficient.

WS provides assistance in resolving wildlife damage on private land in addition to federal- and state-managed land.

WS programs and activities conform to all federal, state and local laws and regulations and are designed and conducted to safeguard the environment, non-target wildlife populations and public safety.

Techniques Used by WS

A wide range of methods are used by WS personnel in predator damage management including both non-lethal and lethal techniques. Recommendations and instructions for non-lethal methods are usually provided by WS and incorporated into the overall integrated management program by livestock producers. In fact, WS National Wildlife Research Center spends 75 percent of its budget on non-lethal technique development. Generally, non-lethal methods are the methods of first resort and already in use by producers before WS assistance is requested; however, these methods alone are not sufficient, and the producers rely on WS to conduct more intense removal of local and individual animals to help curtail predation to acceptable levels.

Non-lethal control methods include fencing, guard animals, fladry, frequent checking and night penning. NASS surveys estimated that sheep producers spent \$9.8 million in 2004 and cattle producers spent \$199.1 million in 2005 on non-lethal methods to protect their livestock from predators.

A concept of replacing the current WS program with one that is entirely non-lethal with indemnification payments for predator-caused losses has been explored and found to be economically

unfeasible. Currently, the annual cost of the livestock protection program conducted by WS to manage mammal predation nationwide is estimated at less than \$20 million in federal and cooperative funds in fiscal year 2006. Thus, the WS program cost is between 5 percent and 10 percent of the estimated cost of a non-lethal damage management program and replacement program (\$300 million to \$400 million). Additionally, the replacement program could include higher levels of the misuse of pesticides and other lethal methods by non-professionals and would likely not reduce predation on livestock to acceptable levels.

Conclusion

Estimates of predator populations by state fish and game officials indicate that the number of predators removed by WS is small compared with overall predator numbers. Lethal control efforts of WS professionals are typically less than 5 percent of a species' overall population. However small this number is, one has to keep in mind that predation is not evenly distributed among producers and can cause significant financial losses to those affected by predation. In fact, WS assistance to protect sheep in 16 western states provides benefits that are 2.4 times the cost of providing the program.



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