

APHIS/Wildlife Services (WS) Update

MAFWA Meeting

Wichita, KS

June 29, 2012

WS has received a lot more media coverage the past 2 months than I would have preferred. Many of you have probably seen the series of articles published in the Sacramento Bee newspaper in late April and early May which was extremely critical of our program. The entire series was also re-published in papers in Oregon, Idaho and several other States since then. It was very similar to the kind of criticism that we used to receive about 20 years ago. This investigative reporter had been working with us for about 6 months and interviewed a number of WS personnel, including me. Despite an enormous amount of information provided to him, the article focused almost entirely on what critics of our program, and 2 former disgruntled employees told him. What was never revealed was that this same reporter also did a similar investigative series on environmental organization in the same newspaper 11 years ago where he was very critical of environmental organizations and essentially concluded that they often manipulated science to fit their needs; their primary effort was fundraising, and they tied up State and Federal wildlife agencies with numerous, often frivolous lawsuits much of it at taxpayer expense. So he wasn't high on environmental organizations, and is definitely not supportive of our efforts, so I am not sure where he actually comes down on wildlife damage management.

There did not appear to be any effort to use anyone from the professional wildlife management community to try to develop a more objective article and then let the reader decide. It basically concluded that our activities were indiscriminate; at odds with science, inhumane, and sometimes illegal. The article recommended that there be a Congressional inquiry including oversight hearings, and that WS be transferred back to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Moving on to another controversial issue for us are wolves. Many of these animal interest groups believe that we just go out and start killing wolves and they have no concept of who the regulatory authority is or that we are responding to a request from a specific State if they are delisted, or the FWS if they are still listed. One area that we are starting to receive additional requests for is controlling wolves to protect big game species. This began in Idaho with a request to remove several dozen wolves in a specific area in Idaho where the elk population was declining. I think whenever I start getting the hundreds of emails to tell me to stop killing wolves, that Dan also get them too.

One of the requirements that I have set for WS to get involved in controlling wolves is for the State (if delisted) to try to meet their wolf management goals through regulated hunting or trapping. If they are unsuccessful, we can assist if requested and the funding is provided. Most of the public accepts the need to control predators when, livestock are being killed. They have a harder time accepting it when wolves are being killed for doing what they do naturally – eat deer or elk.

One activity that we are currently involved with in Kansas and South Dakota and later this year in other Midwestern and western States is the black-footed ferret recovery program. An MOU between the FWS; NRCS; USGS; APHIS/WS; and the WAFWA will be signed to cooperate in this process. WS's part will be to conduct prairie dog boundary control around neighboring lands that request it. In addition, once the new plague vaccine is available, we will also assist in vaccine delivery along with USGA. While most support this effort, there are some groups out there that oppose any form of prairie dog control regardless of whether it is assisting in the recovery of an endangered species like black-footed ferrets.

A rapidly expanding area for WS is feral swine. There is currently a provision in the new Farm Bill to fund a pilot feral swine program if the Farm Bill is passed without this being removed. Our NWRC has been researching a potential new toxicant – sodium nitrite – which I have discussed at the AFWA and North American committee meetings. It is already licensed in Australia and our research has focused on a delivery system whereby pigs can get the toxicant without exposing nontarget animals. The only issue currently are finding a way to keep bears out of the bait or bait boxes, but we are hopeful that either through design of a bait box, or season of use, we can minimize those concerns.

The USDA APHIS Wildlife Services program is in the final phase of collaborating with the US Coast Guard and EPA to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), "Regarding Wildlife Response

Activities During Oil or Hazardous Substance Pollution Incidents”. The primary focus of the document is to continue to improve on communication between the three agencies regarding wildlife response during spills and to acknowledge wildlife response capabilities. Protecting wildlife during a spill is a priority issue that can be very complex surrounded by a lot of public interest and opinion. Well established partnerships prior to spill incidents, aids in a successful response. The MOU is anticipated to be completed and signed by the end of summer.