

From its beginnings in 1914, critics have questioned the federal program of killing coyotes and other predators with guns, traps, snares and poison.

In a seminal series, "The Poisoning of the West" in 1971, journalist Jack Olsen asked: "Were all these deaths necessary? Were they ecologically justified? Or were they part of a runaway killing program that years ago lost its scientific justification and now rushes on like an unbraked train?" Those questions remain relevant.

The Sacramento Bee's Tom Knudson has raised new questions about the Wildlife Services program in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As Knudson found, the agency's practices are "indiscriminate, at odds with science, inhumane and sometimes illegal." Between 2000 and 2010, Knudson reports, the agency intentionally killed more than 2 million native predators, including nearly a million coyotes. Worse, the agency accidentally has killed tens of thousands of nontarget animals (including pet dogs and river otters) because of its nonselective methods. Yet very little monitoring is happening.

This agency needs scrutiny -- a task for Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. Key questions Congress should explore:

What are the real operational costs of predator control -- and who should be paying those costs?

Why isn't the agency doing more to focus on individual problem animals?

Why is the agency using nonselective poison methods? Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Oregon, has a bill that would ban the use of Compound 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate) and M-44s (sodium cyanide).

Why is the agency using expensive aerial gunning (costing \$700 to \$1,000 an hour) to kill predators in federal wilderness areas that are far from livestock on public or private grazing

lands?

Why is the program in the USDA? Why not return it to the Department of the Interior? It was moved by President Ronald Reagan, with congressional approval, in 1985. The claim was that the Department of the Interior does not respect the needs of the livestock industry. Interior has a mission to manage healthy ecosystems, a logical place for a program to manage wildlife.

What are the ripple effects of predator control on ecosystems? For example, what does the killing of coyotes do to jack rabbit populations? The Obama administration also should put together an advisory committee to recommend new policies for predator control. That committee should be a joint USDA-Interior endeavor, and include livestock interests, scientists and organizations such as the American Society of Mammalogists, the Society of Range Management and conservation groups.

Local communities also should examine their relationship with federal predator control. For example, the Marin County Board of Supervisors ended its contract in favor of a policy using lethal methods only as a last resort after nonlethal methods were unsuccessful.

That county now has a program, using funds that used to go to the federal agency, to assist ranchers with guard dogs, llamas, fencing, lambing sheds and shepherding. Losses have declined. As Knudson notes, this program shows that "ranchers can co-exist with predators without federal help." Perhaps it is time for DeFazio to revive his 1998 bill that would have cut all federal funding for lethal predator control. He may have bipartisan help. **Rep. John**

**Campbell,**

R-Newport Beach, asks why we continue a program that is

**"not very effective, has a number of unintended consequences and costs millions of dollars."**

Why, indeed?