

The arrest of a federal Wildlife Services trapper in Arizona earlier this month on a charge of animal cruelty has sparked renewed concern about the little-known agency.

Wildlife Services, which was the focus of a Bee investigative series last year, is a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that specializes in destroying and dispersing animals considered to be a threat to agriculture, the public and the environment.

Since 2000, employees have killed more than 1 million coyotes and other predators, along with many other species, from nonnative starlings and wild pigs to migratory shorebirds, beaver, porcupines, river otters and other native wildlife.

In the process, they have also accidentally killed more than 50,000 non-target animals, from domestic dogs to golden eagles and black bears, The Bee investigation found.

In Arizona, Wildlife Services employee Russell Files is accused of setting traps with the specific intent of capturing a neighbor's dog he found troublesome.

Local law enforcement officers were called to Files' home in El Mirage, on the outskirts of Phoenix, in December by a frantic 911 call from a neighbor.

"The neighbor was real upset. He was like: 'You need to get somebody here now. This is ridiculous. This is animal abuse,' " said El Mirage Police Department detective Kim Walden.

"When I first pulled up, the first thing one of the officers said was: 'You don't want to go over there and look,' " Walden said. "Of course, I have to, to investigate it."

"I was pretty shocked," she said. "There are different kinds of animal abuse. This kind, because I have not seen trapping and what it does to an animal, ranks up there with one of the worst I've

seen."

She said the dog, a 7-year-old female named Zoey, lay on its side in Files' yard, with a front and back leg caught in two leg-hold traps.

"She was covered in blood from trying to chew her way out," she said. "The traps themselves, which I took as evidence, were covered in blood."

Walden said that as officials struggled to free the dog, Files showed up himself.

"He assisted us with getting the dog out of the traps," Walden said. "He said he was tired of the neighbor's dog coming into his yard. I asked him specifically if he was on duty when he set those traps, and he said: 'Yes I was.' "

Files was arrested Jan. 8 and charged with felony animal cruelty. He could not be reached at Wildlife Services' office in Phoenix this week.

The dog, which lost more than a dozen teeth in the ordeal, is recovering.

Wildlife Services spokeswoman Carol Bannerman said the agency is investigating the Arizona incident and could provide no details.

"Since this is an ongoing law enforcement and agency investigation, we cannot comment on it at this time," Bannerman said.

The episode marks the second time in recent months that Wildlife Services agents have been accused of animal abuse.

In late October, photos posted on a federal trapper's Facebook page stirred anger among wildlife advocates.

The pictures show two dogs savagely attacking a coyote in a leg-hold trap and the employee posing with the tattered carcass of a coyote.

They also show other trapped animals, dead and alive.

The employee, Jamie Olson, works in Wyoming for Wildlife Services.

The photos sparked an agency review, as well as calls from two U.S. congressmen – **Reps. John Campbell**, an Irvine Republican, and Peter DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat – for a probe of Wildlife Services.

**"We continue to see more and more acts of cruelty coming from this clearly out-of-control, mismanaged and misdirected department," Campbell** said of the latest incident.