THE ROGUE AGENCY

A USDA program that tortures dogs and kills endangered species

By Christopher Ketcham

One morning in the fall of 1980, Rex Shaddox got a call from his supervisor at the Uvalde, Texas, office of Animal Damage Control. Shaddox had worked for Animal Damage Control, which was then a branch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, for seventeen months. His job was to trap and kill wild carnivores, coyotes in particular, that were said to prey on the flocks of local sheep ranchers.

The supervisor, Charles Brown, told Shaddox to meet with his fellow agents at the city dump outside town. "We're gonna do some M-44 tests," Brown said. "With dogs." The M-44, a spring-loaded device that is planted in the ground and ejects sodium cyanide when set off, was among the weapons used by Animal Damage Control to kill coyotes.

When Shaddox arrived at the dump, he found Brown and several colleagues standing over a pit of stinking garbage. A truck from the Uvalde city pound pulled up. It contained abandoned dogs of various breeds. The pound officer removed a small collie from the truck, and Brown took it by the neck. The animal, docile and quiet, stared at its captors.

Brown brandished an M-44 cartridge. He forced the dog's mouth open and, with his thumb, released the trigger on the device. It sprayed a white dust of cyanide into the collie's mouth.

The dog howled. It convulsed. It coughed blood. It screamed in pain. The animals in the truck heard its wailing. They beat against their cages and cried out.

"All right," said Brown to his trappers. "See, this stuff may be out of date, but it still works." He opened a capsule of amyl nitrite under the collie's nose. Amyl nitrite is an immediate antidote to cyanide poisoning.

The collie heaved and wheezed. Brown then seized it and unleashed another M-44 dose. The dog screamed again. Shaddox started yelling, telling Brown to stop. Brown kicked the collie into the garbage pit.

"He and the other trappers thought it was funny," Shaddox told me. "It's convulsing and dying, and he's laughing. And this is what he's teaching his men. That was just a hell of a way to die. No sympathy, no feeling, no nothing. I'm no animal-rights guy. But heartless bastards is all they were. Right there, that's the culture. And these are federal employees. This is what your government is doing to animals."

Shaddox quit his job after a series of disputes with Brown over the incident in Uvalde. He went on to a long career in wildlife law enforcement, and spent not a small part of it investigating his former employer.

Over the years, Animal Damage Control has been known by many names. At its founding, in 1885, it was the Branch of Economic Ornithology. It became the Bureau of Bio-

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logical Survey in 1905, and was known as the Division of Predatory Animal and Rodent Control in the 1920s. In 1985, the agency became a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and in 1997, its name was changed from Animal Damage Control to Wildlife Services. The agency's purpose, however, has never changed. "The focus of a government trapper is protecting the livestock industry by killing predators," said Carter Niemeyer, a retired Wildlife Services agent. "Ranchers call us up, and the system kicks in, guns blazing."

Since 2000, Wildlife Services operatives have killed at least 2 million native mammals and 15 million native birds. Many of these animals are iconic in the American West and beloved by the public. Several are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. In 2014, Wildlife Services killed 322 wolves, 61,702 coyotes, 2,930 foxes, 580 black bears, 796 bobcats, five golden eagles, and three bald eagles. The agency also killed tens of thousands of beavers, squirrels, and prairie dogs. The goal of this slaughter, according to the agency's literature, is to provide "federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts and create a balance that allows people and wildlife to coexist peacefully." The 1931 Animal Damage Control Act, the agency's enabling legislation, directs it to "conduct campaigns for the destruction or control" of any "animals injurious to agriculture."

By the time Niemeyer retired, in 2000, after twenty-five years at the agency, he had personally killed hundreds of coyotes and had overseen the deaths of thousands more. On some days, working in Montana, Niemeyer skinned ten coyotes an hour as helicopters hauled the heaped carcasses in from the backcountry. (The government sold the skins for revenue.) Wildlife Services gunned down coyotes from airplanes and helicopters. Its trappers used poison baits, cyanide traps, leghold traps, and neck snares. They hauled coyote pups from dens with lengths of barbed wire, strangled them, or clubbed them. Sometimes they set the animals on fire in the dens, or suffocated them with explosive cartridges of carbon monoxide. "We joked about using napalm," Niemeyer told me.

Despite the agency's efforts to wipe out coyotes, they returned in larger numbers. "During my career, it was decades of the same thing repeated to no effect," said Niemeyer. "I think the word for this behavior is 'insanity.' But Wildlife Services has not changed, because their activities are under the public radar, and no one knows how to reform them. Their program fits the western states' obsession with killing predators."

Peter DeFazio, a Democratic congressman from Oregon, has repeatedly called for a congressional investigation of Wildlife Services, describing it as a "rogue agency" that is "secretive" and "unaccountable." He said that he considers the lethal control program a "wasteful subsidy" and has called the agency's practices "cruel and inhumane." DeFazio has proposed legislation to reduce government funding for lethal control, but Congress, under pressure from the livestock industry, rejected these attempts at reform.

"We have seen a host of credible leaked information from credible former employees about the inhumane practices," DeFazio told me recently. He said he has asked Wildlife Services for "detailed numbers about finances and operations, and they won't give us this information. I've served on the Homeland Security Committee, and Wildlife Services is more difficult to get information from than our intelligence agencies."

When I went to Idaho in June 2014 to document what Wildlife Services calls "control actions," I asked the agency if I could accompany its trappers in the field. I was told by a spokeswoman that this was not possible. She explained that "only wildlife-management professionals or persons directly involved are allowed on operations, in order to conduct a safe operation."

I called up Lynne Stone, a wildlife advocate who lives in Ketchum, Idaho, to ask about probable locations for control actions in the state that summer. Stone had cultivated sources—which she refused to disclose—who fed her this highly guarded information.

We met in a café in Hailey, ten miles south of Ketchum. Stone told me that the killing of wolves by Wildlife Services was "merciless and indiscriminate." In July 2012, for example, trappers discovered four wolf pups holed up in a culvert near Idaho City. The pups were killed immediately. The reason, according to Wildlife Services, was that a single sheep had been killed by one or several "offending" wolves from a pack in the area. "Wolves generally give birth around mid-April, so these four pups were likely just over three months old," Stone told me. "They were totally dependent on their pack to feed them. How can three-month-old pups be 'offending'?"

Stone had gotten word that a wolf named B450, a gray male that was the four hundred and fiftieth wolf to be radio-collared by the state's Department of Fish and Game, was on the move in the Sawtooth Valley, forty miles to the north. In 2009, B450 had survived the destruction of his father, mother, brothers, and sisters, who were alleged to have attacked livestock near the town of Stanley, Idaho, and were shot by Wildlife Services trappers in airplanes and helicopters. For two years, B450 had wandered central Idaho alone, but in the spring of 2012 he found a mate, who bore him three pups. They formed a new pack. It was likely, Stone told me, that B450's pack would encounter cattle and sheep grazing on the valley's lush summer grass, and that Wildlife Services would be called in if the wolves opted to prey on the ready meat.

A day after talking with Stone, I drove to the Sawtooth Valley with Natalie Ertz, the founder of WildLands Defense, a nonprofit that monitors wolf packs and their habitats. As we traveled on a dirt road near the headwaters of the Salmon River, Ertz listened on her radio monitor, hoping for a transmission from B450's collar. A storm blew in from the west, the temperature plummeted, and the sky shook with snow. "Wait," she said. She got out of the truck to inspect a frozen pile of scat in the road. It was the leaving of a coyote.

We drove on, and passed a man on a horse who was herding several dozen bleating sheep. "Tasty little meals for a wolf," Ertz said. She admitted that she didn't like ranchers. "It's not personal," she said. "It's that ranchers, as a means of doing business, get Wildlife Services to kill wolves for them."

That night we found a campsite on a benchland under tall pines. We set our tents and built a fire and listened again for the chirrup of B450 on the receiver. Ertz stood up and howled in the night, but no answer came. Not even the coyotes sang.

We listened again for the signal in the morning, hiking through the wet forest after the storm had passed and the weather had warmed. Nothing. "That's good," said Ertz. "Farther away he is from people, the better."

Two weeks later, on June 29, after we were gone from the Sawtooth Valley, a calf was allegedly killed by one wolf or several. The calf's owner called Wildlife Services, whose agents set traps to kill "all offending wolves" in the area. By July 2, a yearling called B647, the son of B450, was found near death in a trap and was killed by an agent. On July 9, a subadult female from the pack, B648, was shot by Wildlife Services. It required two more days to bait and catch B450 in a leghold trap. A Wildlife Services agent killed him too.

John Peavey is a third-generation rancher in central Idaho who runs 7,000 sheep on Flat Top ranch, which lies fifty miles south of the Sawtooth Valley, and on tens of thousands of acres of adjacent public lands. He served for two decades in the Idaho state senate and worked from a young age at Flat Top. During his time in political office, Peavey was known never to appear in public without a cowboy hat on his head.

I told him I was doing an investigation of Wildlife Services. "I suspect this will be an ugly article," he said. "But Wildlife Services is pretty vital to our making do. Predators are a big problem for ranchers in the West. It's our number-one problem. We can't survive without taking care of the predation."

Peavey told me that he loses at least 200 sheep a year to predators and regularly calls Wildlife Services to his aid. In May 2013, he said, he lost more than thirty sheep to wolves. "We were range-lambing, and the wolves come and scatter them to hell and breakfast. One little lamb, about ten minutes old, was killed by a wolf. Really tragic, it just makes you cry—a ten-minute life span." At Peavey's request, Wildlife Services used one of the agency's Piper Cub airplanes to track and shoot six wolves from a pack that was roaming near Flat Top ranch.

Peavey has attempted to use nonlethal methods to dissuade wolves from attacking his sheep on the range, but he claims that they have had little effect. "My guys are out blaring their radios and flashing their lights and smoking pots—that's a fifty-five-gallon drum where we build a fire—and we have big guard dogs, one-hundred-pound Pyrenees and Akbash, though wolves often kill our dogs. We've probably lost ten to twelve dogs over the last six years." His wife, Diane Josephy Peavey, who in recent years has read essays on Idaho public radio praising the virtues of ranching, told me, "It's a little hard to be where we are, with sheep, and watch them get slaughtered, and we're supposed to put the money in to coexist nonlethally. That's fine, but it's a huge expense. Coexistence means the wolves live and all the other animals die."

I ASKED WHETHER WILDLIFE SERVICES WAS ACTING EXTRALEGALLY TODAY. "I KNOW ABSOLUTELY THAT IT'S STILL GOING ON," SHADDOX SAID

John Peavey told me that range-lambing—in which ewes give birth on open public lands rather than in protected sheds on private land—is the only way for ranchers to make a profit. Shed-lambing requires a lot of hay, at great cost. "Six hundred thousand dollars is probably not enough money to outfit a hay crew," he said. "Shed-lambing is too expensive. Our business model is to range-lamb when the weather is warm and the grass is growing. And when the wolves come in, it's incredibly disruptive. We're very vulnerable."

Carter Niemeyer, the retired Wildlife Services agent, said that Peavey's range-lambing operation is also expensive, but the cost gets shifted onto the federal government. "The history of John Peavey over the years has been that when he's out range-lambing, it's led to a lot of calls to Wildlife Services for the removal of wolves and coyotes," he said. "His range-lambing is a long way from home, out there in sagebrush. When the sheep are lambing, the herders aren't supposed to crowd them. You leave them alone. So you've got sheep strung out for miles, ripe for the picking. All you're doing is inviting attack. In some cases, when you put livestock way out there in the backcountry where it's beyond the capability of the owner to protect them, it's a form of animal cruelty. Do we continue to reward this bad behavior by bringing in gunships to kill predators that are simply reacting to lambs on the range as predators should and must react?"

Niemeyer said that it was galling to watch stockmen use public lands for forage while refusing to accept the real price of their business model. He told me about a former Wildlife Services agent who described sheep ranchers as "cry boys and cheap men"—because, as Niemeyer put it, "they're always whining and they're incredibly cheap, demanding the public pay their costs."

I asked him about Peavey's claim that predators are the number-one problem facing ranchers. The most recent reports from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, a branch of the USDA, suggest that stockmen annually lose almost 500,000 head to predators nationwide. The USDA data, however, is based on self-reporting by ranchers.

Niemeyer told me I should also look at the methods Wildlife Services used to confirm depredations. The agency was supposed to conduct its own due diligence of ranchers' reports, but the investigations were farcical. "A rancher calls up and says, 'Goddamn wolves killed twenty-eight of my stock,' but he can't prove

a thing. And we say, 'All right, Charlie, we'll get 'em.' The trapper shows up to the site and toes the carcass of the animal with his boot. 'Yep. Wolf did it.' And that's the investigation. Of course a wolf did it—the rancher says so, which makes it the truth."

After Rex Shaddox left Wildlife Services, in 1980, he worked as an undercover narcotics cop in Texas and Colorado, an investigator for the Humane Society of the United States, and a wildlife-crimes detective with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, where he is still posted. He has continued to follow Wildlife Services' activities as a part of his current job. "If you're a wildlife cop," he told me, "you constantly hear about Wildlife Services doing bad things."

Between January 1990 and September 1991, Shaddox led an undercover investigation into the illegal distribution and use of a poison called Compound 1080 in Wyoming. The tasteless, odorless toxin has no known antidote. A single ounce can kill 200 adult humans, or 20,000 coyotes, or 70,000 house cats.

Stockpiles of the poison were supposed to have been destroyed or turned over to the Environmental Protection Agency after it was banned in 1972, but the State of Wyoming never complied with the destruction order. Instead, Wildlife Services, along with members of the Wyoming Wool Growers Association, the Wyoming Farm Bureau, and the state's Department of Agriculture, secretly sold Compound 1080 to ranchers for use in what Shaddox described as a conspiracy for "the illegal poisoning of wildlife, the illegal lacing of cadavers with poisons on public lands, and the illegal killing of endangered species." Not one government official implicated in the conspiracy went to jail. "Some of these guys got better jobs in Wildlife Services," Shaddox said.

Doug McKenna, who retired in 2012 after twenty-five years as a wildlife-crimes enforcement officer at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, worked with Shaddox on the Wyoming investigation. I asked McKenna whether he thought Wildlife Services had reformed its ways. "I don't believe it for a minute," he said. "The agency still disregards federal and state environmental, wildlife-protection, and resource regulations."

He told me about an Arizona rancher named Jose Manterola, who, in 2002, had poisoned—accidentally, by his account—bald eagles that were roosting on the public-land allotments where he was running sheep. "We went to Wildlife Services and asked them for help with the investigation. The trappers told us, 'We can't talk to you because this guy is a client of ours.' I was shocked. We're a federal agency asking another federal agency for help in a criminal investigation, and we were stonewalled. We eventually prosecuted the rancher, and his federal grazing lease was revoked, but we got no help from Wildlife Services."

When domestic pets were accidentally killed by poisons that had been distributed by Wildlife Services, Shaddox told me, the motto was "Shoot, shovel, and shut up." Shaddox said that Charles Brown, the supervisor who poisoned the collie with M-44, ordered him to "cover up the killing of these nontarget dogs, to remove the collars and bury the dead animals, and make sure always to separate the collars and the bodies." (Brown, who is now the agency's eastern regional director, declined to comment for this article.)

I asked Shaddox whether he believed that Wildlife Services was acting extralegally today. "I know absolutely that it's still going on," he said. "I hear it from state and federal wildlife agents. I know absolutely that the cover-up of the illegal killing of domestic pets, the illegal poisoning of wildlife, and the illegal use of 1080 and M-44s is still going on."

Samuel Sanders, another former trapper I spoke with, worked for Wildlife Services in Nevada for seven years. He rose to the rank of supervisor before quitting in 2011. "Violating both federal and state law when it comes to the application of pesticides is encouraged by Wildlife Services," Sanders told me. Employees, he said, weren't properly certified for the use of poisons in the field. "The certification test was fixed so that employees always pass. The supervisor reads the answers off to employees."

Shortly before he quit, Sanders filed a complaint against Wildlife Services in the federal Merit Systems Protection Board court, charging that his higher-ups retaliated against him for whistleblowing about the agency's violations of federal and state law. The judge dismissed the case on a technicality.

"Although many employees have witnessed some of their co-workers and even supervisors violate laws," Sanders told me, "they say nothing, fearing the retaliation they've witnessed when others have reported the violations. They think it will just stop happening after time, but it doesn't. They know the supervisors are aware of the violations. When an employee does report violations by W.S. employees or management, upper management does a token investigation to cover up the incident. Even the national leaders in D.C. have been made aware of this, and they do the same thing."

In 2012, a Wildlife Services trapper named Jamie Olson posted a series of graphic photos to Facebook that appeared to depict his dogs attacking and killing a coyote caught in a leg trap in Wyoming. He included portraits of himself smiling beside a coyote's mutilated cadaver. (Olson declined to comment for this article.)

In response to the photos, Peter DeFazio wrote a letter to Thomas Vilsack, the secretary of the USDA, requesting an audit of "the culture within Wildlife Services." His letter stated that Olson "may have apparently committed acts of animal cruelty" that violated the agency's directives about trapped wildlife. Those directives include instructions that trapped animals "be dispatched immediately" and that employees "exhibit a high level of respect and professionalism when taking an animal's life."

An internal investigation by Wildlife Services concluded that the trapped coyote was being used by Olson to train his dogs "how to 'posture' when confronting a trapped coyote." Shaddox scoffed at this account. "I've read the report and findings and looked at the photos. The dogs are absolutely attacking and killing the coyote in the series of pictures," he told me.

Olson was not fired or reprimanded for his treatment of the coyote. His behavior, according to Wildlife Services documents, "violated no existing rules."

In September 2014, I drove into Idaho's Salmon-Challis National Forest with Natalie Ertz's brother, Brian, who had spent many hundreds of hours tracking Wildlife Services trappers to document their kills. We had gotten information about a pending lethal-control action against a pack of wolves in Moyer Basin, a remote valley of the Yellowjacket Mountains, where Wildlife Services agents, according to our source, would be out prowling the sky in one of the Piper Cubs, a noisy yellow single-prop known as the Killer Bee.

We camped on a forested bluff overlooking the valley. We'd have a fine view of the airplane's kill zone. The landscape was splendid. The soft-contoured mountains faded in distant blue shrouds, the great forests of conifers sighed in the breeze, the autumn aspens glowed in the slant light of the afternoon sun, and the rich bottomlands were flooded behind beaver dams. "Prime wolf habitat," Ertz said.

A September storm erupted during the night and bent our tents, pelting us with rain and sleet, and soaking our sleeping bags. Ertz awoke before me, keeping his ear to the sky at dawn. But no Killer Bee.

Over breakfast he recounted the two days he'd spent in the spring of 2010 looking for members of the Buffalo Ridge wolf pack, which he heard had been targeted with a kill order. The pack had been seen near Squaw Creek, a tributary of the Salmon River that ran seventy-five miles south of Moyer Basin. Ertz arrived before the trappers, ascended through an aspen grove, and found where the pack was denning. The adults were on a hunt, and had left their pups behind. The afternoon was overcast, Ertz said, and threatening rain. Each time the thunder rumbled, the pups, young and innocent, howled in response, volleying their high-pitched cries in a kind of conversation with the sky. "It was one of the most profoundly wild experiences of my life," Ertz told me.

Ertz and I set out in his car, driving up and down rough dirt roads for several hours until at midday we found a flatbed Ford parked in a meadow next to a stream. The decals on the door said USDA, and a ramp attached to the bed suggested that it had carried an A.T.V. whose driver was off in the backcountry.

There was a warning on a fence post nearby:

> MECHANICAL DEVICES (TRAPS, SNARES, OR OTHER RESTRAINING DEVICES) HAVE BEEN PLACED IN THIS AREA TO CAPTURE ANIMALS CAUSING DAMAGE OR HARM. THESE DEVICES AND THE ANIMALS CAPTURED IN THEM ARE THE PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT.

The notice had been issued by Wildlife Services.

We waited. After two hours, an A.T.V. came trundling toward us, driven by a trapper in his thirties who wore a hooded sweatshirt and a trucker's cap. Strapped across the dashboard was a four-foot pole with a loop at its end. The loop is meant to cinch around a wolf's neck so that an animal can be killed without close contact.

The trapper wouldn't give his name. I asked him about the trapping of wolves in Moyer Basin. "I'm not supposed to be talking to you," he said. "Talk to Todd Grimm"—referring to the Idaho state director of Wildlife Services.

Indicating the nearby sign, I asked what kinds of traps he was using, where they were located, and whether they posed a risk to the public. "Talk to Todd," he said. "That sign has warned you, and that's all I'm going to say."

When I asked for a phone interview with Wildlife Services, Lyndsay Cole, an assistant director of public affairs at the USDA, asked me to provide all my questions in writing. I submitted thirty-five questions related to specific points in this article and to Wildlife Services policy as a whole. Cole didn't answer the questions; instead, she emailed me a single-page statement with links to various public-relations documents the agency had put out. "Wildlife Services experts use a science-based Integrated Wildlife Damage Management (IWDM) decision-making model," the statement said. "Activities are conducted to minimize negative impacts to overall native wildlife populations." Cole eventually responded to questions sent by a fact-checker from this magazine. She stated, in part, "We aren't able to speculate on methods that may have been used against policy in the past," and called the examples of agency misbehavior "not representative." When I asked Wildlife Services if I could talk with Todd Grimm, the agency did not respond to the request.

Once, during Carter Niemeyer's time with Wildlife Services in Montana, a sheep rancher asked him whether coyotes killed for revenge. "Of course not," Niemeyer told him. "Why do you ask?" Wildlife Services had recently mounted an aerial-gunning campaign in the hills around the rancher's property to strike at coyotes before they could take sheep. The result of the cull, the perplexed rancher explained, was increased depredation.

Rob Wielgus, a wildlife ecologist at Washington State University, has an explanation for this paradox. In 2013, he examined data that showed that the hunting of adult male cougars led to more attacks on livestock by the remaining cat population. "Killing older resident cats resulted in a huge influx of teenage male cats," Wielgus told me. "The teenage males are the livestock depredators. The older cats were cops that kept the younger troublemakers out."

In 2014, Wielgus published a similar study of wolves and their attacks on livestock in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. He reviewed the number of wolves that were killed annually over twenty-five years and the number of depredations of livestock for each year, and declared that the livestock industry was "not going to be happy" with his conclusion: Kill more wolves, he said, and depredations on livestock increase.

Wielgus believes that lethal assaults on predators produce social chaos in their populations. "We've now seen this in grizzlies, black bears, cougars, leopards, and wolves. Social disruption is a huge negative effect. Why is the livestock lobby unhappy with this? Because they want to kill predators. They cannot believe the scientific evidence. They're convinced that the only good predator is a dead predator."

Niemeyer had told me to read the work of Robert Crabtree, an ecologist and the founder of the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center. Crabtree found that more coyote pups within a given litter survive if their numbers are culled. Not only are there more attacks on livestock following lethal control of coyotes—there are also more coyotes. Wildlife Services has killed nearly a million coyotes during the past decade, but the number of coyotes in the seventeen Western states today has remained the same.

"We keep family units broken up, leading to a lot of dispersal, a lot of subadult coyotes moving into other country after their families are broken, and younger coyotes breeding sooner than they would if they weren't thrown into being alone," Niemeyer said. "It's all very self-serving for the Wildlife Services program. You create steady work by steady persecution."

In 1998, Peter DeFazio sponsored an amendment to reduce funding to Wildlife Services by $10 million, from a total budget of $50 million. The bill passed in the House by a vote of 229 to 193. Then the American Farm Bureau went into action, bombarding members with phone calls and faxes. House Republican Joe Skeen, a New Mexico stockman whose ranch had been visited ninety-nine times by Animal Damage Control agents between 1991 and 1996, led the assault on the amendment. Within twenty-four hours, the House took the unusual step of revoting the bill. Thirty-eight lawmakers switched their votes from yes to no. "I've seen such a revote happen perhaps a half-dozen times in twenty-one years in Congress," DeFazio told me.

In 2011, he tried again. He sponsored an amendment to the House agriculture appropriations bill to cut $11 million from Wildlife Services' budget. The amendment, which would have returned the money to the federal treasury for deficit reduction, was endorsed by Taxpayers

for Common Sense, the Humane Society, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. It was defeated.

In 2012, DeFazio introduced a bill called the Compound 1080 and Sodium Cyanide Elimination Act, which would have banned the deployment of sodium cyanide for predator control and the use of Compound 1080 for any purpose. The bill died in committee.

Jonathan Lovvorn, the chief counsel at the Humane Society of the United States, says that he has tried and failed to rein in Wildlife Services through the court system. The agency's statutory mandate "just says, 'Kill wildlife,' without any restrictions," he told me. "There really is no law to apply that might restrain the agency, even with a sympathetic judge."

Recently, I spoke on the phone with Brooks Fahy, the executive director of Predator Defense, a nonprofit group based in Oregon. Fahy has spent more than thirty years monitoring Wildlife Services. He doesn't see much hope. "The political power of livestock is too strong," he said. I asked Fahy about the Wildlife Services Reform Act, which DeFazio drafted but failed to propose in the last session. It would have banned aerial gunning, along with the use of neck and foot snares and M-44 cyanide devices, and mandated the housing of livestock behind barriers during lambing and calving season. It would have also required that "all available and viable nonlethal management and control methods" be attempted before lethal control is implemented. The nonlethal methods include electric fencing to shock and dissuade predators; "harassment and scaring devices," namely "pyrotechnics and noisemakers, trained dogs, effigies, electronic devices such as recorded distress calls"; and "lights such as spotlights, strobe lights, and lasers."

The bill itself was a compromise, fashioned to be politically acceptable to ranching interests by promoting the idea that livestock and predators can coexist on public lands. Fahy was skeptical. "We can have more fencing, sirens, and strobe lights," he said, "but at what cost to the ecosystem and the wildlife?" And in the end it may be, as John Peavey's experience suggests, that these measures will not work. Wolves, after all, were designed to eat sheep.

In the meantime, the lethal-control methods continue to bear unintended consequences. In 1998, Bill Guerra Addington, a third-generation Texan, tripped an antiquated M-44 that was designed to fire a .38 Special cartridge. He nearly lost his hand to the bullet. "I equate these predator-killing devices to land mines designed to kill people," he wrote in a letter to DeFazio. In 2003, Dennis Slaugh, a rockhound from Vernal, Utah, pulled at an M-44 out of curiosity and was sprayed in the face with white poison dust. He began vomiting and rushed to a hospital. The cyanide has lingered in his system and is slowly starving his body of oxygen.

Brooks Fahy said that he has received several hundred reports from pet owners about the disappearance of dogs and cats owing to what the owners claim were Wildlife Services activities. He told me the story of a pit bull named Bella, who was killed in Texas, in 2011, by an M-44 trap. The trap was placed less than a thousand feet from the doorstep of Angel and J. D. Walker, the dog's owners. According to Fahy, the trapper had received special permission from Wildlife Services to kill coyotes outside his normally assigned duty areas as a favor to his father, who leased ranchland adjacent to the Walkers' property. The Walkers found Bella dead ninety feet from the trap. Her mouth was bloody. She had vomited. "She had a horrible, weird smell, not just a death smell," said Angel.

The Walkers buried their dog, and the next day they complained to Michael J. Bodenchuk, the agency's Texas director. "He never responded to us at all," said Angel. The following week, the local trapper reset the M-44s that he had placed near the Walkers' house, including the one that had killed Bella. One afternoon, returning home from school with her sons, Angel found three freshly killed coyotes hung on the fence along the road, with wire tied around their necks. She considered it a message from Wildlife Services. ■