

APHIS Releases Wildlife Services' Safety Review

On August 4, 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) released a report entitled, "Wildlife Services Program Safety Review: Evaluation of Current Safety Program and Identification of Safety Improvements."

The review, conducted by subject-matter experts external to APHIS, looked at nine targeted areas within the agency's Wildlife Services (WS) program. They are: aviation, explosives and pyrotechnics, firearms, hazardous materials, immobilization and euthanasia, pesticides, vehicles, watercraft, and zoonotic diseases.

Overall, the year-long evaluation concluded that the program's current safety procedures are effective in protecting the health of its employees and that WS has a successful safety record given the nature of the work performed by its employees.

Purpose of the Safety Review

Like many agencies whose mission includes public safety, WS' work involves certain activities with inherent risks. In response to an increase in on-the-job accidents in 2005 through 2007, WS officials decided to initiate a comprehensive safety review. WS officials initiated the review to ensure that the program is providing the safest possible working environment for its employees while still enabling them to complete the program's mission.

The review focused on issues of employee safety and was not designed to assess the appropriateness or effectiveness of the program's wildlife damage management activities. To encourage employees to interact fully with the review teams and ensure transparency and the subsequent validity of the review teams' recommendations, employees knew that no punitive steps would be taken if safety violations were observed during the review.

Review Teams

Nine teams were used to complete the overall review; each team was tasked with reviewing one of the selected safety areas. Five of the nine reviews were conducted by or contracted through government

agencies. Three were conducted by nonprofit organizations, and one was conducted by a private company. Among other things, each team reviewed APHIS and WS directives, evaluated the program's existing safety program and training courses, and conducted on-site visits. Additionally, the teams each produced a final report with recommendations for improvements. More detailed information regarding each review team can be found in the overall safety review, which is posted online at www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage.

WS Program Area Reviewed	Reviewing Organization
Aviation	Interagency Committee of Aviation Safety
Explosives and Pyrotechnics	The Institute of Makers of Explosives
Firearms	National Security Academy
Hazardous Materials (laboratory/manufacturing chemical/biological)	Century Environmental (subcontracted through Federal Occupational Health)
Immobilization and Euthanasia Drugs	Global Wildlife Resources (subcontracted through The Berryman Institute)
Pesticides	EnviroHygiene LLC (subcontracted through Federal Occupational Health)
Vehicles	Tidewater Inc (subcontracted through Federal Occupational Health)
Watercraft	Maryland Department of Natural Resources Police
Zoonotic Diseases	The Berryman Institute

Summary Findings and Next Steps

Overall, the report indicates that WS' existing safety procedures are effective in protecting the health of its employees. However, reviewers also found that as the program works to address difficult wildlife damage issues, it faces ongoing and equally complex safety challenges. As a result, the safety review includes a variety of recommendations.

WS has already implemented several recommendations from the report, including selecting an experienced aviator as the program's national aviation coordinator and obtaining the Gold Standard Certification for aviation safety. This certification—issued by the Interagency Committee on Aviation Safety—verifies that APHIS meets or exceeds Federal Management Regulation standards and is committed to aviation safety.

The implementation of other recommendations is well underway, including the preparation of comprehensive directives concerning watercraft use and zoonotic diseases. WS' Safety and Health Council, a committee of WS employees charged with advising management on safety and health issues, will be responsible for implementing these recommendations. Other WS committees are revising existing directives for other program areas as well.

Additionally, WS is developing a plan for replacing the training currently provided to employees at offices in each State with a training program to be offered through a comprehensive training institute using a standardized curriculum.

For the safety review's additional and more complex recommendations—as well as those that may require funding—WS is establishing implementation priorities. Among these additional recommendations are the implementation of computerized tracking systems for training and materials and the purchase of new equipment, such as personal locator devices for employees working in remote locations.

As a general safety caution, the safety review also encourages WS to remain aware of broader issues and behaviors that can negatively impact employee safety. For example, the review noted the natural tendency for some to become complacent to safety issues when completing commonly performed tasks. Specifically, the review mentions several tasks such as operating motor vehicles, handling firearms, and taking proper precautions concerning zoonotic diseases. WS will continue to monitor and address these issues by implementing the safety review's recommendations to improve the use of existing safety awards programs, maintain consistent discipline, and to uniformly post safety messages.

The desire to accomplish the WS mission as safely as possible was prevalent among all WS personnel interviewed during the course of completing the review. WS plans to use this desire and the review's recommendations to further build upon what the safety review found to be a strong program safety record.

Existing Safety Program

The WS safety program is comprised of a National Wildlife Services Safety and Health Council, safety officers within various special emphasis programs, and collateral duty safety officers at State and regional levels. WS created safety committees and protocols for specific areas that have been successful and worked well in some programs and States. Among these program committees are the explosives safety, firearms, and immobilization and euthanasia committees.

Further supported by the agency's employee safety and health infrastructure, WS has developed a functional safety system around the APHIS model, which is based on Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards.

WS has completed 12 separate safety reviews over the last 14 years and implemented several improvements to ensure its employees' welfare. Among them, in 1986 WS developed policy and procedural guidance for field operations and safety training programs in consultation with private explosive engineering consultants. Tools from the WS explosives program, such as the "Quick Card" pyrotechnic safety guide, have been adopted as industry standards and are distributed by the OSHA and pyrotechnics dealers.

The 1998 review of the aviation program brought about the development of a state-of-the-art Aviation and Training Operations Center (ATOC) in Utah with courses and equipment specifically designed for WS pilots, flight crew, and ground crew.

Additional Information

For more information about WS or to view the full safety review, visit www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage.

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