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Managing Wildlife Conflicts:

The Mission of the APHIS Wildlife Services Program



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Wildlife, a Valuable Resource

Wild animals are an important part of our environment, and for centuries they have served our needs in a number of ways. Historically, many species were used for food, clothing, or adornment. But in those earlier years, wildlife was seldom managed. Some species, such as the passenger pigeon, became extinct; and other species, like the bison and beaver, became seriously depleted. Modern wildlife management of the twentieth century reversed the decline of wildlife populations in the United States and resulted, for many species, in the most abundant populations ever known.

Today, wildlife continues to provide people with numerous benefits. Wild animals contribute to our enjoyment of outdoor recreational activities such as camping, hiking, photography, and hunting. The knowledge that abundant wildlife exists is important for many people. Diverse wildlife species are major components of a healthy environment; beavers, for example, can create aquatic habitats beneficial to fish, waterfowl, and many other plant and animal species.

Wildlife is receiving increased attention as people develop a broadened environmental consciousness. Wildlife is recognized as having esthetic as well as practical value and is managed by the Federal and State Governments to ensure future abundance. But in some instances, this abundance has led to conflicts with human interests, as the following examples illustrate.

- People admire the industrious beaver. However, beaver dams may cause flooding that damages valuable timber stands, roadways, private property, and farmland. In November 2002, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) realized it might have to close busy Interstate 85 in Greenville County because a beaver dam in a drainage structure under the highway threatened to cause flood waters to make the road impassible. NCDOT contacted the Wildlife Services (WS) division of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to evaluate the problem. WS removed the dam at considerable cost savings to NCDOT. This solution avoided having to close the Interstate for 2 or more days and maintained public safety along I-85.



When populations increase, encounters with wildlife, like mountain lions in the West, become more frequent.

- In the Southeastern United States alone, beavers cause an estimated \$100 million worth of damage annually to public and private property. In 13 Eastern States, WS prevented an estimated \$25 million of beaver-caused losses to agricultural resources and property in 2003. These savings represent a benefit–cost ratio of \$5.86 in resources saved for every \$1.00 spent for damage management.

- Mountain lions, coyotes, bears, and wolves kill thousands of lambs and calves each year. In 2001, annual losses attributed to predators neared 500,000 head of livestock, including cattle, sheep, and goats, costing owners more

than \$71 million. Sheep and lamb owners endured the greatest losses—nearly half the annual total. Coyotes were the major predator responsible for overall livestock losses. Of lamb losses to predators in 1999, roughly 65 percent were attributed to coyotes. Even in Eastern States, where coyotes were relatively unheard of 15 years ago, incidents of predation on livestock are increasing.

- Wildlife can adversely affect public safety and the economics of aviation when commercial and military aircraft collide with birds and mammals (“wildlife strikes”) during takeoff or landing. Accord-



Each year, coyotes cause millions of dollars’ worth of losses to sheep, goat, and cattle producers.



WS works with the FAA and the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy to reduce wildlife strikes. WS provided assistance at more than 500 airports and air bases in 2002 to reduce wildlife hazards to aviation.

ing to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), approximately 6,200 wildlife strikes with civil aircraft were reported in 2002. FAA officials estimate that only 20 percent of the strikes that actually occurred were reported. The U.S. Air Force reported more than 3,800 bird strikes involving military planes the same year. In all, these collisions cost the U.S. aviation industry well over \$500 million a year in damages and downtime. In addition, the potential for human injury and death is increased significantly when wildlife is not kept away from airports. Worldwide, more than 155 people have died as a result of bird strikes since 1990.

- Wildlife-borne diseases can pose serious threats to public health, domestic animals, and populations of threatened and endangered wildlife. Rabies, tularemia, and plague are among zoonotic

diseases where wildlife presents a public health risk. Rabies and bovine tuberculosis are two diseases that can be transmitted among susceptible wildlife and domestic animals, including livestock.

The virus that causes rabies—a disease that is always fatal if left untreated—mutates as it spreads through specific wildlife reservoirs, such as raccoons, skunk, foxes, and bats. Species-specific variations in rabies make monitoring, surveillance, and control a broad and challenging task, but a job well worth doing. By eliminating individual strains of the disease and preventing the spread of rabies to new areas, the American taxpayer can expect to save substantial amounts of money over time. Right now, rabies-related costs exceed \$300 million a year. And that figure does not take into account the anxiety, fear, and psychological

trauma among human populations impacted by this oldest of recorded diseases.

During 2003, the U.S. Public Health Service's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 7,170 cases of animal rabies in 49 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Of these cases, more than 91percent were in wildlife, with racoons being the rabid animal most frequently reported.

Many people do not realize that everyone is adversely affected by the actions of wildlife at one time or another. Every consumer pays more for commodities when

supplies are decreased or damaged by wildlife. The total value of that damage is extremely difficult to estimate on a national scale. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and other researchers have previously documented annual predation losses to selected commodities across the United States. Annual losses include more than \$140 million worth of blueberries, apples, grapes, corn, and sunflowers, and more than \$14 million worth of catfish and trout. NASS estimates that wildlife-caused damage to U.S. agriculture (excluding forestry) is worth between \$600 million and \$1.6 billion a year.

Responsible Management of Wildlife Damage

Maintaining a balance between human and wildlife needs requires sensitivity. In addressing the conflicts between wildlife and people, wildlife managers must thoughtfully consider not only the needs of those directly affected by wildlife damage but also a range of environmental, sociocultural, and economic factors.

Wildlife is a valuable public resource. Federal and State Governments are responsible for maintaining healthy, stable wildlife populations. Accordingly, when wildlife causes damage, government has an obligation to manage that damage. Wildlife damage-management responsibilities and authorities fall to different agencies depending on the species, type of problem, and location. The U.S.

Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has primary responsibility for managing migratory birds and federally listed threatened and endangered species. State wildlife management agencies have primary authority for the management of nonmigratory birds and all other species of wildlife not federally listed as threatened or endangered. Legislation authorizes USDA to provide assistance upon request of State Governments, private individuals, and other Federal agencies to control and prevent damage and disease caused or carried by wildlife. Cooperative agreements provide for the management of various species, including management for the purpose of reducing and preventing damage caused by wildlife.



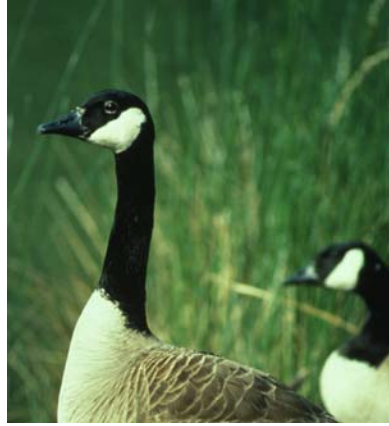
Fish-eating birds represent a major threat to the profitability of aquaculture operations.

The Role of Wildlife Services

Wildlife Services—a unit of USDA's APHIS—assists in solving problems that are created when species of wildlife cause damage to agriculture. WS personnel also assist with wildlife problems involving property and natural resources as well as threats to human health and safety. WS' National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) is the world's only research center devoted entirely to the development of methods for effective wildlife damage management. NWRC is providing an expanded range of scientific information and environmentally based methods that are effective in protecting resources and conserving wildlife.

WS is committed to the well-being of the environment and wildlife and acts as a protective buffer between wildlife and people. Failure to provide solutions to wildlife damage sometimes leads individuals to take actions that are ecologically and biologically harmful. Professional wildlife biologists and technicians employed by APHIS' WS program can sometimes prevent such unwise reactions. By providing a biologically sound, economically efficient response coupled with education to individuals experiencing damage, WS benefits individuals, the public, wildlife, and the environment.

WS is a Federal cooperative program that responds to requests by persons and agencies needing help in managing wildlife damage. Its field operations are conducted in



Canada goose populations have increased dramatically in recent years, causing damage to real estate—from golf courses to swimming pools.

accordance with all Federal and State guidelines and in cooperation with wildlife management professionals from Federal and/or State agencies. In all instances, WS programs are conducted to ensure no negative impact on wildlife populations.

WS helps reduce wildlife damage to

- Agricultural crops—grain, sunflowers, vegetables, fruit, and nuts;
- Livestock—cattle, sheep, goats, swine, horses, and poultry;
- Commercial forests and forest products;
- Aquaculture—cultivated trout, catfish, bait fish, and marine shellfish and lobsters;

- Natural resources—wildlife, wildlife habitat, water quality, and rangelands;
- Urban and industrial property—private homes, public buildings, airports, golf courses, and reservoirs;
- Public health and safety—preventing bird strikes at airports and controlling wildlife-borne diseases; and
- Threatened or endangered species—such as the whooping crane, California least tern, Aleutian goose, San Joaquin kit fox, and roseate tern.

How WS Does Its Job

Most of WS' efforts are conducted on private land, but work is done on some public lands as well (less than 10 percent of federally owned land).

Cost sharing is an integral component of the WS program. Supervised primarily by WS personnel, most field activities are funded in part by Federal, State, or local agencies; industry groups; or individuals requesting wildlife damage-management assistance. When requested, WS provides help through technical assistance and direct control.

Technical Assistance

Technical assistance involves providing advice, recommendations, information, or materials for use in managing wildlife damage problems and helping threatened and endangered species to thrive. WS employees also help identify the responsible wildlife species and determine the extent of the damage. WS may provide recommendations concerning habitat modification, cultural practices to reduce the likelihood of wildlife damage, behavior modification of the troublesome wildlife species, or ways to reduce specific local wildlife populations that are causing damage. Such assistance always takes into account environmental

factors and relevant laws and regulations. WS sometimes recommends that regulatory agencies issue permits to allow resource owners to deal with wildlife problems.

Direct Assistance

Some problems caused by wildlife species are too complex or difficult for any one individual, group, or agency to solve. For example, dealing with thousands of birds roosting in an urban neighborhood is beyond the capabilities of most individuals. Likewise, capturing coyotes, bears, mountain lions, or other large animals that are preying on livestock usually requires specialized equipment and skills. Surveillance and control of wildlife-borne diseases in animal populations usually involves both State and Federal agencies working together. In these instances, WS provides expert wildlife specialists to help whoever is experiencing the problem. Direct assistance is usually provided when the resource owner's efforts, such as habitat modification or husbandry practices, have proven ineffective and technical assistance alone is inadequate. WS staff consider practical methods for resolving wildlife damage problems and take action by implementing the most strategically appropriate measures.

Techniques Recommended by WS

Whether or not a particular action is appropriate or practical depends on a variety of factors, including the species causing damage, the type of damage and its geographic location, and laws and regulations. In general, three types of actions can be considered for resolving instances of animals damaging a resource.

One approach is to move the resource away from the animal causing damage. Moving sheep out of a pasture to reduce the likelihood of predation by coyotes and moving beehives to an area away from marauding black bears are examples of this approach.

A second possibility is to exclude an animal from the resource. Using scare tactics to keep birds away from crops and electric fencing to keep predators away from livestock are examples of this technique.

The third possibility is to relocate or remove the animal causing the problem. Snaring and removing a bear from a sheep allotment and trapping a coyote that has been killing calves are examples of this approach.

Often, the most effective strategy to resolve wildlife damage problems is to integrate the use of several methods or approaches, either all at once or in turn. This is known as integrated pest management (IPM). WS uses and recommends IPM to reduce damage by wildlife while minimizing any harmful effects of the management measures on humans, nontarget wildlife, domestic livestock, and the environment. IPM may incorporate husbandry techniques like shed lambing, modifying habitat (e.g., removing bird roosting cover adjacent to crops), or using capture devices or removal methods.

WS personnel use and recommend the best methods available, but some of the methods currently used in wildlife damage management are not new. For example, cages, leghold traps, and snares have been used for hundreds of years. They continue to be important in wildlife management for situations where no other alternative is available. Leghold traps can be modified with padded or offset closures to make them



Beavers cause damage through the flooding of property, roads, crops, and forests.

more humane for target animals and to facilitate the release of nontarget animals back to the wild with little or no injury.

In selecting management techniques for specific damage situations, WS professionals consider the species responsible for the damage; the magnitude, geographic extent, duration, and frequency of the resource loss; and the likelihood of the conflict's being repeated. In choosing a management technique, WS specialists consider the biological and legal status of the target species and potential nontarget species, local environmental conditions and possible environmental impacts, and the practicality of available management options.

The WS program does not exterminate native wildlife species because such efforts are contrary to WS policy, are biologically unwise and impractical, and are often illegal.

APHIS spends millions of dollars each year on research to develop and improve techniques for reducing wildlife damage. Most of this research is conducted by APHIS scientists at the NWRC, which is headquartered in Fort Collins, CO. The Center also has eight field stations throughout the United States. Major research activities include developing data to support Environmental Protection Agency registrations for pesticides and materials used to manage wildlife damage and conflict situations; developing nonlethal wildlife-management techniques; developing new vaccines and delivery systems to prevent disease; evaluating the effectiveness and safety of new and existing management methods; studying the biology and behavior of wildlife species that cause damage and risks to human health and safety; assessing wildlife damage; and providing scientific information on wildlife damage management to the WS program, other governmental agencies, and the public.



Research activities include tracking bird movements by means of radiotelemetry.

Additional Information

For further information about WS, contact your State's office of USDA, APHIS, WS, or write to
USDA-APHIS-WS
4700 River Road, Unit 87
Riverdale, MD 20737-1234.

Wildlife Services also maintains a toll-free number you can call (1-866-4USDA-WS, or 1-866-487-3297) and an informational Web site at <<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ws>>.