USDA

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Marketing and
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Programs

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

Wildlife Services

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FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
and
DECISION
for
PREDATOR DAMAGE MANAGEMENT IN SOUTHERN IDAHO

APRIL 2008

I. AGENCY AUTHORITIES

WS is the Federal agency directed by law and authorized by Congress to reduce damage to agricultural and natural resources, property and to resolve public health or safety concerns caused by wildlife. The primary statutory authorities for the APHIS-WS program are the Act of March 2, 1931 (46 Stat. 1468; 7 U.S.C. 426-426b) as amended, and the Act of December 22, 1987 (101 Stat. 1329-331, 7 U.S.C. §426c).

Under the Act of March 2, 1931, as amended, and 7 U.S.C. §426c, APHIS may carry out wildlife damage management programs, or enter into cooperative agreements with states, local jurisdictions, individuals and public and private agencies whereby they may fund and assist in carrying out such programs. WS activities are conducted at the request of and in cooperation with other Federal, state, and local agencies, private organizations, and individuals. Accordingly, WS' authorities support and authorize its mission of providing Federal leadership and expertise to reduce problems caused by injurious and/or nuisance wildlife.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PREPARATION

In 2002, the Idaho Wildlife Services (WS) program completed an Environmental Assessment[1] (EA) (USDA 2002a) which addressed the need to conduct Predator Damage Management (PDM) and the potential impacts of various alternatives for responding to predator damage in southern Idaho. The analysis area encompasses approximately 31 million acres in southern Idaho, including all lands in Ada, Adams, Bannock, Bear Lake, Bingham, Blaine, Boise, Bonneville, Butte, Camas, Canyon, Caribou, Cassia, Clark, Elmore, Franklin, Fremont, Gem, Gooding, Jefferson, Jerome, Lincoln, Madison, Minidoka, Oneida, Owyhee, Payette, Power, Teton, Twin Falls and Washington Counties, as well as a small portion of Custer and Lemhi Counties encompassed by the Little Lost River drainage.

Availability of the EA was announced through publication of legal notices in The Idaho Statesman, the Times News, the Idaho State Journal, and the Post Register for 3 consecutive days. Additionally, copies of the EA and an invitation to provide comments were mailed to approximately 100 individuals and organizations who had previously expressed an interest in the WS program. A 30-day public comment period was provided for public input on the pre-decisional EA; the public comment period ended on March 20, 2002.

The EA identified 6 Alternatives which were analyzed in detail. Alternative 2, the Proposed Action "Expanded Wildlife Protection Activities" was selected as the Preferred Alternative and a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was issued and a Decision signed April 16, 2002 (USDA 2002b).

[1]This EA supersedes the PDM EA that was prepared in 1996 for the same analysis area.

III. EA ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING and 5-YEAR REVIEW

Environmental Monitoring Reports (hereafter referred to as Monitoring Reports) for Federal Fiscal Years (FYs) 2002 (USDA 2004a), 2003 (USDA 2004b), 2004 (USDA 2005), 2005 (USDA 2006) and 2006 (USDA 2007a) were prepared to review program activities and to determine if the EA was consistent with applicable environmental regulations. The purpose of the Monitoring Reports is to: 1) review program data for each FY and determine if the FONSI and Decision for the EA are still appropriate, and 2) review standard operating procedures designed to minimize or avoid potential adverse environmental effects. In addition to the environmental monitoring, a 5-Year Environmental Monitoring Review report (USDA 2007b) (hereafter referred to as the 5-Year Review) was prepared. The purpose of the 5-Year Review is to: 1) review the results of WS' PDM activities conducted in southern Idaho during FY 2002 to 2006 and evaluate the accuracy of the EA analysis, 2) review standard operating procedures designed to minimize or avoid potential adverse environmental effects, and 3) provide an opportunity for public review.

Based on the results of the Monitoring Reports and the 5-Year Review, there continue to be no indications that WS' activities are having a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment in the EA analysis area.

IV. MAJOR ISSUES

Major issues identified by cooperating agencies and the public included:

1. Cumulative impacts on viability of wildlife populations.
2. Effectiveness and selectivity of wildlife damage management methods.
3. Risks posed by damage management methods to the public and domestic pets.
4. Potential effects to threatened and endangered (T/E) species.
5. Cost effectiveness of predator damage management activities.
6. Potential environmental impacts associated with aerial hunting activities.

V. ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED IN DETAIL

Six alternatives, ranging form an expanded version of the current program to no program at all, were analyzed in relation to the primary issues identified above. Four additional alternatives were considered but not analyzed in detail. A thorough discussion of the anticipated effects of the various alternatives as they related to the issues was provided Chapter 4 of the EA. The following summary provides a brief description of each alternative and its anticipated impacts.

Alternative 1. Continuation of the Current Program (No Action Alternative). Consideration of the No Action alternative is required under 40 CFR 1502.14(d), and provides a baseline for comparing the potential effects of all the other alternatives. This alternative consists of using all currently authorized chemical and mechanical control methods in an integrated approach to resolve a wide variety of predator damage problems in the analysis area. Control actions may be initiated under either a corrective or a preventive strategy, in response to current or historic livestock losses, or in response to wildlife agency requests for assistance. Alternative 1 results in only low levels of impact on wildlife populations, presents very low risks to the public and T/E species, and is cost-effective. Currently used methods are effective and selective.

Alternative 2. Expanded Wildlife Protection Activities (Proposed Action). This alternative would involve the use of all the same control methods as used in Alternative 1, but would also provide for WS involvement in additional activities to protect the threatened northern Idaho ground squirrel, the southern Idaho ground squirrel, and sage grouse, as requested by the responsible wildlife management agency. The FWS has requested WS' assistance to protect dwindling populations of the northern Idaho ground squirrel from predation by badgers and other predators, and may request WS' assistance to protect the southern

Idaho ground squirrel in the foreseeable future. The IDFG may also request WS' assistance in conducting predator removal in areas where predation is believed to be impacting sage grouse nesting success and/or chick survival. No additional tools or methods would be used in these efforts beyond those used in the current program. Cumulative impacts to targeted predator populations could be slightly higher under this alternative, but would still be of a low magnitude overall. Risks to the public and to T/E species would be low, and cost-effectiveness would be expected to similar to Alternative 1.

Alternative 3. No Preventive Control. This alternative would limit PDM activities to only those situations where predation on livestock or wildlife was presently occurring. It would not allow for implementing preventive control activities in areas of historic losses prior to the time when livestock once again returned to an area of historic livestock losses. WS would be unable to respond to some requests for assistance from livestock producers and the IDFG. All of the same control tools available under Alternatives 1 and 2 would be available under Alternative 3, but would only be used after current losses were verified by WS employees. Cumulative impacts on targeted predator populations, selectivity of methods, and risks to the public or T/E species would be similar to Alternatives 1 and 2, but predation losses would likely be higher and cost-effectiveness would be lower.

Alternative 4. No Use of Chemical Control Methods. This alternative would limit PDM activities to the use of only mechanical control methods such as foothold traps, snares, and aerial hunting. Some of the most selective control methods, such as the Livestock Protection Collar and the M-44 device, would not be available for use. The bird toxicant DRC-1339 is the most practical, selective and effective method for reducing numbers of ravens, but this method would not be available under Alternative 4. It would likely be much more difficult, or perhaps not even possible in some cases, to achieve a desired level of raven removal for improvement of sage grouse nesting success and/or chick survival if DRC-1339 were not used. Cumulative impacts on wildlife populations would be low, but selectivity of available control methods and effectiveness would be lower than under a fully integrated control program. Risks to the public, pets and T/E species from M-44 use are ordinarily low, but would be nonexistent under this alternative.

Alternative 5. Technical Assistance Program. Under this alternative, WS would not provide any operational damage management assistance to persons or agencies experiencing predator damage problems, but would instead provide only advice, recommendations, and limited technical supplies and equipment. PDM would likely be conducted by persons with limited experience and training, and with little oversight or supervision. Risks to the public and to T/E species would probably be greater than under Alternatives 1-4, and effectiveness and selectivity would probably be lower. Cumulative impacts on wildlife populations would be low.

Alternative 6. No Federal Predator Damage Management Program. This alternative would terminate the Federal WS program in the analysis area. The impacts of this alternative would be very similar to the impacts of Alternative 5 since neither of these alternatives involves any operational control activities carried out by the WS program. This alternative would not allow the WS program to comply with its statutory responsibilities, and risks to the public and T/E species would probably be greater than for Alternatives 1-4. Members of the public experiencing predator damage problems would need to conduct predator damage control operations themselves, or seek assistance from some other source such as IDFG or private predator control operators. Predator control would still occur, but without the oversight and accountability inherent with a Federally operated program. The lack of availability of some specialized control methods and expertise would probably result in reduced effectiveness and selectivity, and increased amounts of predator damage. Cumulative impacts on wildlife populations would be low.

VI. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

As part of a review and comment process, the 5-Year Review was made available to the public through a Notice of Availability (NOA) published for 3 consecutive days, starting May 28, 2007 in the "Legal Notice" section of The Idaho Statesman, Boise; ID. The NOA stated that WS was accepting public comments for a 30-day period and copies of the EA, FONSI and Decision, and the 5-Year Review report

may be obtained from the USDA-APHIS-WS State Office in Boise. The WS State Office mailing address and phone number were provided. Additionally, copies of the 5-Year Review and the NOA with an invitation to provide comments were mailed to 13 individuals/organizations who had previously expressed an interest in the WS program.

Copies of the EA, the 2002 FONSI/Decision, Monitoring Reports and the 5-Year Review are available from the Idaho WS State Office, USDA, APHIS, 9134 W. Blackeagle Drive, Boise, Idaho, 83709-1572.

Comments from the Public on the 5-Year Environmental Monitoring Review Report

A total of 2 responses were received during the public comment period. After reviewing these responses, it was determined that their comments had already been considered and analyzed in the EA or in the 2002 FONSI/Decision and will not be readdressed in this document.

VII. DECISION and RATIONALE

The analysis provided in the EA and the 5-Year Review indicates that there will not be a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, affecting the quality of the human environment or to wildlife populations from implementing the proposed action, and the action does not constitute a major Federal action. Management actions are conducted pursuant to applicable laws, regulations policies and orders to reduce damages or potential damages caused by migratory birds in Idaho, as requested. I find the current program to be environmentally acceptable, addressing the issues and needs while balancing the environmental concerns of State and Federal management agencies, landowners, and advocacy groups.

The rationale for this Decision is based on several considerations. This Decision takes into account current and previous public comments, social/political and economic concerns, public health and safety and current science. However, the foremost considerations are that PDM by Idaho WS will only be conducted at the request of landowners/managers, management actions are consistent with applicable laws, regulations, policies and orders, and no adverse impacts were identified in the analysis. As a part of this Decision, the Idaho WS program will continue to provide effective and practical technical assistance and direct management techniques that could reduce damage.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The analysis in the EA indicates that there will not be a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment as a result of this proposed action. I agree with this conclusion and therefore find that an Environmental Impact Statement need not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Predator damage management, as conducted by WS in the southern Idaho analysis area, is not regional or national in scope.

2. The proposed action would pose minimal risk to public health and safety. No injuries to any member of the public are known to have resulted from WS activities in the analysis area.

3. There are no unique characteristics such as park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic areas, or ecologically critical areas which would be significantly affected.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Although there is some opposition to predator control, the expected environmental effects associated with implementing the proposed action are not controversial among experts.

5. Based on the analysis documented in the EA and the accompanying administrative file, the effects of the proposed predator damage management program on the human environment would not be significant. The effects of the proposed activities are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks. Current WS predator damage management activities have been occurring for decades in the analysis area with no significant adverse environmental impacts.

6. The proposed action would not establish a precedent for any foreseeable future action with significant effects.

7. No significant cumulative effects were identified through this assessment. The number of animals taken by WS, when added to the total known other take of all species, falls well within allowable harvest levels.

8. The proposed activities would not affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor would they likely cause any loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

9. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concurred, through formal and informal Section 7 consultation, that WS' current and proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Canada lynx and gray wolf, nor is it likely to adversely affect the grizzly bear or any other listed species in the analysis area.

10. The proposed action would be in compliance with all Federal, State, and local laws imposed for the protection of the environment.

11. Predator removal efforts associated with the proposed sage grouse/predator control study would be conducted only in limited areas and for a relatively brief period of time during each year of the study. Predators from surrounding areas would be expected to move into the treatment areas within a few weeks to several months, and local populations would be expected to return to pretreatment levels within one to two years or sooner.

DECISION

I have carefully reviewed the EA and the input provided during the public involvement process. I believe the continued implementation of Alternative 2, the Proposed Action, will provide the best overall compromise in addressing the issues identified in the EA while also providing for a predator damage management program which will best meet the needs of cooperating agencies, organizations and individuals who may request WS assistance. Continued implementation of Alternative 2 will involve the use of no additional control methods beyond what are being used in the current program, but will allow WS to respond to requests for assistance in providing predator control services for protection of sage grouse. It will also allow for WS to cooperate with other Federal and State agencies in their efforts to promote recovery of northern and southern Idaho ground squirrel populations by protecting these species from predation.

For additional information regarding this Decision, please contact George Graves, APHIS Wildlife Services, 9134 W. Blackeagle Drive, Boise, ID 83709, telephone (208) 378-5077.

Mark D. Collinge

Mark D. Collinge
State Director
Idaho Wildlife Services

4/2/08
Date

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