

June 25, 2014

Dear Stakeholders:

Over the last several years, a handful of prominent newspapers have published biased stories about Wildlife Services that I consider an affront to the wildlife biologists and other professionals in the program who provide outstanding service to all Americans. In a couple of instances, I've written to the editors of the papers that ran the stories to express my dissatisfaction and I'm glad they published my responses. But given the word limit on letters to the editors, I haven't been able to write as much to defend Wildlife Services as I'd like, and what I've submitted has often been condensed even further.

So that's why I'm writing this letter today. I'm proud of Wildlife Services, its employees, and the vital work it does for American agriculture. I very much want to address the false information about Wildlife Services I've read, and continue to read, about the program. I can't do it all in one letter, though, so I intend to send additional letters periodically over the coming months, and post them all to the APHIS Web site.

Today, I'd like to respond to the allegations in a recent story in the Washington Post that Wildlife Services is "out of control," less than transparent, and harmful to wildlife in the United States.

The American people, through its elected representatives in Congress, have funded Wildlife Services annually for over one hundred years. This year, Congress provided \$20 million in new funding to Wildlife Services to begin a Nation-wide program to control feral swine and reduce the damage they cause to agriculture, property, and natural resources. In today's era of lean budgets, Congress trusts Wildlife Services and values the program as one that is well-managed, environmentally responsible, and effective. Nothing could be farther from the truth than to say that Wildlife Services is rogue, irresponsible, and out of control.

Wildlife Services is also supported by every U.S. natural resource and professional wildlife management organization in the country. The program is run by professional wildlife biologists who adhere to the public trust doctrine and love and respect our Nation's wildlife and animals. They simply recognize that managing human-wildlife conflicts sometimes requires lethal control. Wildlife Services is not alone in this belief: professional wildlife managers and natural resource protection organizations all recognize that lethal control is an integral part of responsible wildlife management. We do not apologize for putting the interests of human health, safety, and people's livelihoods on an equal footing with the noble cause of preserving wildlife.

Some argue and try to convince others that Wildlife Services kills 4 million bears, wolves, and coyotes annually. This is patently false; these predators represent a very small percentage of the animals Wildlife Services removes each year. And overall, the numbers of animals killed are a very small percentage of their overall populations in the United States. Wildlife Services' work is not endangering any native wildlife population in our country—far from it, actually. For example, last year, out of a national population of almost 3.9 million resident Canada geese, WS took just 23,000 to protect airports and aviation, recreational areas, and agriculture.

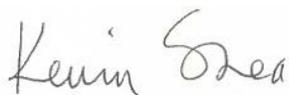
Last year, as is the case every year, the vast majority of the animals killed by Wildlife Services were birds, mostly invasive species like European starlings that eat crops, foul water and livestock feed with disease, roost in large numbers in neighborhoods, and threaten airplanes full of travelers. Because of increased requests for help, we removed more birds last year than in previous years. Just for some perspective, there are trillions of birds in the United States; the 3.5 million we removed are far less than the 1 to 4 billion cats kill every year and hardly indicative of an “out of control” agency.

What is often lost in the conversation regarding Wildlife Services is that the program is a worldwide leader in the development and use of nonlethal wildlife management tools. Our National Wildlife Research Center devotes the majority of its research funding to the development or improvement of nonlethal wildlife damage management tools and methods. Last year, using the latest and innovative methods developed at the Center, Wildlife Services moved or dispersed without harm almost 18 million animals—more than 80 percent of the program’s wildlife encounters.

We are fully transparent about all of Wildlife Services’ work—both lethal and nonlethal. We respond to every request for information about the program to the fullest extent of our ability under the Freedom of Information Act and other laws passed by Congress. For the last 16 years, we have published management reports (available at www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/) detailing all of Wildlife Services’ work, including numbers of wildlife dispersed and lethally removed. The numbers that critics of the program use to attack the program, twisted as they are, are pulled directly from these reports on our Web site. We also make a full and accurate reporting each year of the numbers of animals that we unfortunately mistakenly kill. From FY 2006 through FY 2012, Wildlife Services’ unintentional lethal take was one-tenth of one percent. While we regret each of these instances, we have learned from them, taken corrective action, and continually strive to improve and prevent the unintentional killing of animals.

Wildlife Services is made up of thoroughly trained wildlife professionals and others who are fully accountable to Congress and the public, comply with all laws, and are dedicated to preserving native ecosystems. It is disappointing when they are unfairly criticized and vilified for the work they do. Without them, there’d be more birds colliding with airplanes, endangering passengers; less support for wild wolf packs in the West; more endangered wildlife species across the country; more incidents of people contracting rabies from raccoons and skunks; and more wildlife and animals that die in emergencies and natural disasters. Not to mention farmers and ranchers having a harder time making a living and higher food prices at the grocery store for the rest of us.

I’ll say it again: I’m proud of Wildlife Services and the work it does. I look forward to sharing more information with you about the program in the months to come.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kevin Shea".

Kevin Shea
APHIS Administrator