

**DECISION
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: MANAGING LIVESTOCK PREDATION BY COYOTES,
DOGS, AND RED FOXES IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Wildlife Services (WS) program completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) on alternatives for the protection of livestock from damage and risks associated with coyotes, dogs, and red foxes in Virginia (USDA 2015). The EA documents the need for action and assesses potential impacts on the human environment of three alternatives to address that need.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

The EA was made available for review and comment from October 19 to November 21, 2015 through a Notice of Availability (NOA) published in the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. WS also published this EA on the program website. No comments were received. All correspondence on the EA is maintained at the WS State Office, P.O. Box 130, Moseley, VA 23120.

ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH LIVESTOCK PROTECTION MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The EA analyzed a range of management alternatives in context of issues relevant to the scope of the analysis including:

- Effects of Damage Management Activities on Coyote and Red Fox Populations
- Effects of Damage Management Activities on Dogs
- Effects of Damage Management Activities on Non-target Animals, Including Threatened and Endangered Species
- Effects of Damage Management Activities on Human Health and Safety
- Humaneness and Animal Welfare Concerns
- Effects of Damage Management Activities on the Aesthetic Values of Coyotes, Dogs and Red Foxes
- Effects of Damage Management Activities on the Regulated Harvest of Coyotes and Red Foxes

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Coyotes, dogs and red foxes can be found across the Commonwealth throughout the year. Therefore, damage or threats of damage to livestock associated with coyotes, dogs and red foxes could occur wherever coyotes, dogs or red foxes and livestock occur as would requests for assistance to manage damage or threats of damage. Assistance would only be provided by WS when requested by a landowner or manager and WS would only provide direct operational assistance on properties where a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), Cooperative Service Agreement (CSA), or other comparable document had been signed between WS and the cooperating entity.

Upon receiving a request for assistance, the proposed action alternative, or those actions described in the other alternatives could be conducted on private, federal, Commonwealth, tribal, and municipal lands in Virginia to reduce damage and threats to livestock associated with coyotes, dogs and red foxes. The analyses in this EA are intended to apply to actions taken under the selected alternative that could occur in any locale and at any time within the analysis area. This EA analyzes the potential impacts of coyote, dog

and red fox damage management and addresses activities in Virginia that are currently being conducted under a MOU, CSA, or other comparable document with WS. This EA also addresses the potential impacts of coyote, dog and red fox damage management in the Commonwealth where additional agreements may be signed in the future.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTERNATIVES

The following three alternatives were developed to respond to the issues identified in Chapter 2 of the EA (USDA 2015). A detailed discussion of the effects of the alternatives on the issues is described in the EA under Chapter 4; below is a summary of the alternatives.

Alternative 1: WS Would Continue to Address Damage to Livestock through an Adaptive Integrated Approach (Proposed Action / No Action Alternative)

The proposed action/no action alternative would continue the current implementation of an adaptive integrated approach utilizing non-lethal and lethal techniques, as deemed appropriate using the WS Decision Model, to reduce damage and threats to livestock associated with coyotes, dogs and red foxes in Virginia. Under this alternative, WS could respond to requests for assistance for managing damage and threats to livestock associated with coyotes, dogs and red foxes by: 1) taking no action, if warranted, 2) providing technical assistance to property owners or managers on actions they could take to reduce damage or threats of damage, or 3) provide technical assistance and direct operational assistance to a property owner or manager experiencing damage or threats of damage. Direct operational assistance could be provided when funding is available through federal appropriations, the Commonwealth of Virginia, taxes on sheep sold in Virginia or other sources. However, WS response to requests for assistance is dependent upon those persons initiating the request. Those persons receiving technical assistance can 1) take no action, 2) choose to implement WS' recommendations on their own, 3) use the services of a private nuisance wildlife control agent, 4) use volunteer services of private individuals or organizations (e.g. private trappers or predator hunters), 5) use the services of local law enforcement or animal control authorities (in the case of dogs) or 6) use the services of WS (direct operational assistance) when available. Direct operational assistance would only be conducted by WS after a MOU, CSA, or other comparable document listing all the methods the property owner or manager will allow to be used on property they own and/or manage was signed by WS and those requesting assistance.

The most effective approach to resolving any animal damage problem is to use an adaptive integrated approach that may call for the use of several methods simultaneously or sequentially. This approach, used by WS for providing both technical assistance and direct operational assistance, is commonly known as integrated management (see WS Directive 2.105). The philosophy behind integrated management is to implement methods in the most effective manner while minimizing the potentially harmful effects to humans, target and non-target species, and the environment. Integrated damage management may incorporate both non-lethal and lethal methods depending upon the circumstances of the specific damage problem. Non-lethal methods disperse or otherwise make an area where the damage is occurring unattractive or unavailable to the species causing the damage, thereby reducing the presence of those species in the area. Lethal methods remove individuals of the species causing the damage, thereby reducing the presence of those species in the area and the local population.

Alternative 2: WS Would Address Damage to Livestock Using Technical Assistance Only

Under this alternative, WS would provide those persons requesting assistance with managing damage and threats to livestock from coyotes, dogs or red foxes with technical assistance only. This alternative would place the immediate burden of operational damage management work on the resource owner, other governmental agencies, private businesses and/or private individuals. Those persons experiencing

damage or threats to livestock could take action using those methods legally available to resolve or prevent damage to livestock associated with as permitted by federal, Commonwealth, and local laws and regulations or those persons could take no action.

Alternative 3: WS Would Not Address Damage to Livestock

Under this alternative, WS would not conduct technical or direct operational assistance to reduce threats or alleviate damage to livestock associated with coyotes, dogs or red foxes. WS would not be involved with any aspect of managing damage to livestock associated with coyote, dog or red fox. All requests for assistance received by WS to resolve damage caused by coyotes, dogs or red foxes would be referred to the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF), the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), local law enforcement or animal control authorities and/or private entities. This alternative would not prevent other federal, Commonwealth, and/or local agencies, including private entities from conducting damage management activities directed at alleviating damage and threats to livestock associated with coyotes, dogs or red foxes.

Similar to Alternative 2, this alternative would place the immediate burden of operational damage management work on the resource owner, other governmental agencies, private businesses and/or private individuals. Those persons experiencing damage or threats to livestock could take action using those methods legally available to resolve or prevent damage to livestock associated with coyotes, dogs or red foxes as permitted by federal, Commonwealth, and local laws and regulations or those persons could take no action.

CONSISTENCY

Wildlife damage management activities are consistent with work plans, MOU's, and policies of WS, the VDGIF, the VDACS, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). WS consulted with the VDGIF regarding potential impacts to wildlife in Virginia from the proposed action in the EA. The VDGIF provided no concerns regarding WS' determination that the proposed action would not adversely impact populations of state-listed species.

MONITORING

The WS program will annually review its effects on target species and other species addressed in the EA to ensure those activities do not impact the viability of wildlife species. In addition, the EA will be reviewed each year to ensure that the analyses are sufficient.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

No significant cumulative environmental impacts were identified from any of the three alternatives, including the proposed action. Under the proposed action, the lethal removal of predators by WS would not have significant impacts on statewide predator populations when known sources of mortality were considered. No risk to public safety was identified when activities were provided and expected by requesting individuals under Alternative 1 since only trained and experienced personnel would conduct and/or recommend damage management activities. There would be a slight increased risk to public safety when persons who reject assistance and recommendations conduct their own activities under Alternative 2 and when no assistance was provided under Alternative 3. However, under all of the alternatives, those risks would not be to the point that the effects would be significant. The analysis in the EA indicates that an integrated approach to managing damage and threats caused by predators would not result in significant cumulative effects on the quality of the human environment.

DECISION AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have carefully reviewed the EA prepared for this proposal and the input from the public involvement process. I find the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) to be environmentally acceptable, addressing the issues and needs while balancing the environmental concerns of management agencies, landowners, advocacy groups, and the public. The analysis in the EA adequately addresses the identified issues, which reasonably confirm that no significant impact, individually or cumulatively, to the quality of the human environment are likely to occur from the proposed action, nor does the proposed action constitute a major federal action. Therefore, the analysis in the EA does not warrant the completion of an EIS.

Based on the analyses in the EA, the need for action and the issues identified are best addressed by selecting Alternative 1 and applying the associated standard operating procedures. Alternative 1 successfully addresses (1) livestock protection management using a combination of the most effective methods and does not adversely impact the environment, property, human health and safety, target species, and/or non-target species, including T&E species; (2) it offers the greatest chance of maximizing effectiveness and benefits to resource owners and managers; (3) it presents the greatest chance of maximizing net benefits while minimizing adverse effects to public health and safety; and (4) it offers a balanced approach to the issue of humaneness when all facets of that issue is considered. Further analysis would be triggered if changes occur that broaden the scope of damage management activities that affect the natural or human environment or from the issuance of new environmental regulations. Therefore, it is my decision to implement the proposed action/no action alternative as described in the EA.

Based on the analyses provided in the EA, there are no indications that the proposed action would have a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment. I agree with this conclusion and therefore, find that an EIS should not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Livestock protection management, as conducted by WS, is not regional or national in scope.
2. The proposed action would pose minimal risk to public health and safety. Based on the analyses in the EA, the methods available would not adversely affect human safety based on their use patterns and standard operating procedures.
3. There are no unique characteristics such as park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic areas, or ecologically critical areas that would be significantly affected. WS' standard operating procedures and adherence to applicable laws and regulations would further ensure that WS' activities do not harm the environment.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Although there may be some opposition to predator damage management, this action is not highly controversial in terms of size, nature, or effect.
5. Based on the analysis documented in the EA and the accompanying administrative file, the effects of the proposed 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.
6. The proposed action would not establish a precedent for any future action with significant effects.

7. No significant cumulative effects were identified through the assessment. The EA analyzed cumulative effects on target and non-target species populations and concluded that such impacts were not significant for this or other anticipated actions to be implemented or planned.
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. WS has determined that the proposed program would not affect any federally listed T&E species currently listed in the state. In addition, WS has determined that the proposed activities would not adversely affect state-listed T&E species.
10. The proposed action would comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws.

The rationale for this decision is based on several considerations. This decision takes into account public comments, social/political and economic concerns, public health and safety, and the best available science. The foremost considerations are that: 1) livestock protection management would only be conducted by WS at the request of landowners/managers, 2) management actions would be consistent with applicable laws, regulations, policies and orders, and 3) no significant effects to the environment were identified in the analysis. As a part of this Decision, the WS program would continue to provide effective and practical technical assistance and direct management techniques that reduce damage and threats of damage.



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12/11/15

Date

APPENDIX A
LITERATURE CITED

USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture). 2015. Environmental Assessment: Managing Livestock Predation by Coyotes, Dogs and Red Foxes in the Commonwealth of Virginia. USDA, APHIS, WS, Moseley, VA.