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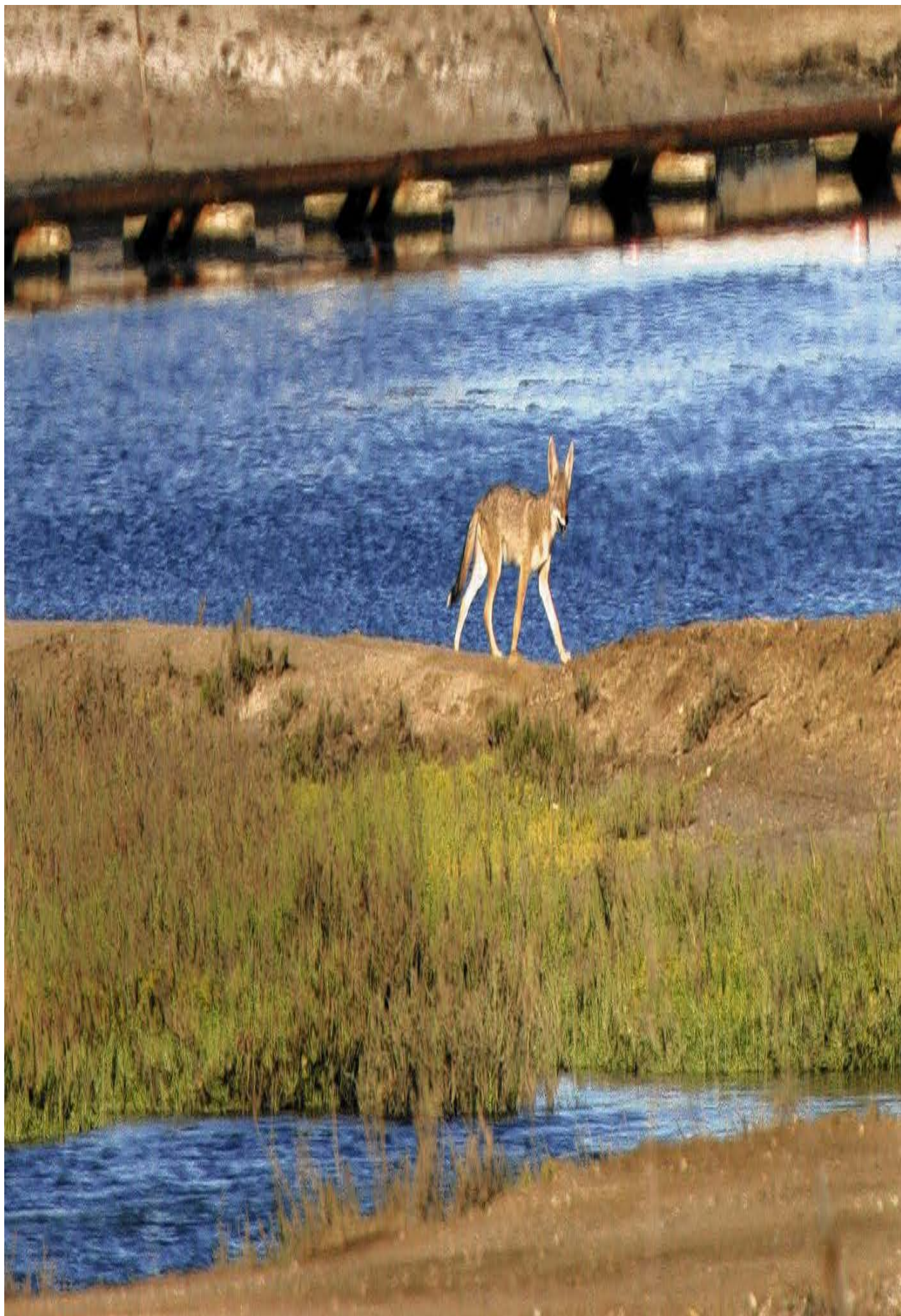
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NATION

Congressmen question costs, mission of Wildlife Services agency

By BY JULIE CART

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Coyotes are often targets of U.S. Wildlife Services if they attack cattle or farm animals. But some former agency workers, biologists and members of Congress question the agency's methods and the cost to taxpayers. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's inspector general will investigate a federal agency whose mission is to exterminate birds, coyotes, mountain lions and other animals that threaten the livelihoods of farmers and ranchers.

The investigation of U.S. Wildlife Services is to determine, among other things, "whether wildlife damage management activities were justified and effective." Biologists have questioned the agency's effectiveness, arguing that indiscriminately killing more than 3 million birds and other wild animals every year is often counterproductive.

Reps. Peter A. DeFazio (D-Ore.) and John Campbell (R-Irvine) requested the review, calling for a complete audit of the culture within Wildlife Services. The agency has been accused of abuses, including animal cruelty and occasional accidental killing of endangered species, family pets and other animals that weren't targeted.

DeFazio says the time has come to revisit the agency's mission and determine whether it makes economic and biological sense for taxpayers to underwrite a service, however necessary, that he argues should be paid for by private businesses.

"Why should taxpayers, particularly in tough times, pay to subsidize private interests?" said DeFazio, ranking Democrat on the House Committee on Natural Resources. "I have come to the conclusion that this is an agency whose time has passed."

Wildlife Services was created in 1931 as part of the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. It has wide-ranging responsibilities, including rabies testing and bird control at airport runways. But the bulk of its work is exterminating nuisance wildlife by methods that include poisoning, gassing, trapping and aerial gunning.

The agency acts as a pest management service not only for agribusiness and ranches, but also for other federal agencies, counties and homeowners who might have such problems as raccoons in an attic. Other services include protecting endangered species and maintaining game herds for hunters.

The services are free or substantially subsidized, which many private predator- and

pest-control companies say unfairly undercuts their business. States and counties complain that they are responsible for an increasing share of the costs.

DeFazio and Campbell are also calling for congressional oversight hearings. DeFazio says he has spent years asking for but not receiving information from Wildlife Services, which he calls "the least accountable federal agency" he has ever seen.

He said he had to learn from the Los Angeles Times about an internal audit the agency conducted last year. The audit found the agency's accounting practices were "unreconcilable," lacked transparency and violated state and federal laws. Further, the audit revealed that \$12 million in a special account could not be found.

"The last time I tried to get more specific financial information, they just blew me off and said they couldn't provide that," DeFazio said in an interview. "Yet, at the same time, they were undertaking this audit. So, the managers were, at best, disingenuous, and at worst, undertaking a coverup."

A Wildlife Services spokeswoman said the agency had already begun to carry out changes recommended in the audit.

In response to allegations of improper behavior by agents, the spokeswoman said the department does not condone animal cruelty and that employees are trained to strictly follow state and federal wildlife laws.

Information that DeFazio's office says Wildlife Services has refused to disclose includes the identities of its clients. DeFazio's office has determined that the agency acts as an exterminator for golf clubs and resorts, hunting clubs, homeowners associations, paving companies and timber giants International Paper and Weyerhaeuser.

The agency's supporters argue that the cost is appropriately borne by consumers, who value local food production. In California, many ranchers and farmers would go broke if they had to pay private companies to do the work provided free of charge by Wildlife Service agents, said Noelle G. Cremers, a lobbyist for the California Farm Bureau.

Members of Congress have heard allegations for years of improper — and in some cases, illegal — practices within Wildlife Services. Attempts at congressional investigations have been stalled by what DeFazio calls the agency's "powerful

friends" in agriculture and ranching lobbies.

Among the allegations legislators want to review are those by Gary Strader, a Wildlife Services hunter in Nevada until 2009. He alleges he was fired for reporting to superiors that colleagues had killed five mountain lions from airplanes, which is a felony. He said his supervisor told him to "mind his own business."

Strader said the same supervisor gave similar advice when the hunter discovered that a snare he set had unintentionally killed a golden eagle. Knowing that the bird was protected under federal law, Strader called his supervisor for guidance. "He said, 'If you think no one saw it, take a shovel and bury it,'" Strader said.

Agents are required to maintain records of their kills, but critics say those records are opaque and probably inaccurate. The official count, for instance, does not include offspring that will die after adult mountain lions or bears are killed, or coyote pups inside a den that has been gassed.

"The numbers are absolutely manipulated — gravely underestimated," said Brooks Fahy, executive director of Predator Defense, a wildlife conservation group.

Part of the difficulty of wildlife control work is making sure the lethal methods reach only the intended targets. Cyanide traps set for coyotes can kill other animals. Many domestic dogs — thousands, by the accounting of watchdog groups — have been inadvertently poisoned by capsules meant for coyotes.

Rex Shaddox, a former Wildlife Services agent in Wyoming, said agents "were told to doctor our reports — we were not allowed to show we killed household pets." Shaddox said he knew a rancher who kept a grisly souvenir of the agency's collateral damage: a 10-foot chain of interconnected dog collars.

Shaddox says the agency rarely handles federally controlled poisons legally. Agents are required to post signs where pesticides and poisons are placed and maintain detailed logs. But supervisors tell them not to, Shaddox and other former agents said.

Wildlife Services agents have also been accused of animal cruelty, particularly in the use of dogs to control and kill coyotes. Last year, a Wyoming-based trapper posted photographs to his Facebook page showing his dogs savaging a coyote caught in a leg-hold trap. Other pictures showed the agent's animals mauling bobcats and raccoons.

The agency said it was investigating.

Wildlife biologists also criticize the agency's work, which they say ignores science. Bradley J. Bergstrom, a conservation biologist at Valdosta State University in Georgia, and other biologists at the American Society of Mammalogists say they have been frustrated by the agency's unwillingness to share scientific data tracking the effectiveness of its approach.

For instance, Bergstrom said, eradicating coyotes from a landscape creates unintended consequences. He said a Texas study found that killing coyotes that preyed on cattle led to an increase in rodents, which prey on crops. The pest problem shifted from those who raise cattle to farmers who grow crops.

"Preemptive lethal control ... makes no sense," Bergstrom said. "It's known as the 'mowing the lawn' model — you just have to keep mowing them down."

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