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Our Mission

Sinapu, named after the Ute word for wolves, is dedicated to the restoration and protection of native carnivores and their wild habitat in the Southern Rockies, and connected high plains and deserts.

Sinapu is a registered non-profit corporation under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Tax Code (EIN 84-1172881).

All contributions to Sinapu are tax-deductible unless otherwise noted for services provided.

November 14, 2007

William Clay, Deputy Administrator
U.S. Department of Agriculture-APHIS-Wildlife Services
14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Room 162 South
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Re: National Safety Review of the Wildlife Services' Program

Dear Deputy Administrator Clay:

In the U.S. Department of Agriculture-Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service-Wildlife Services (WS) Stakeholder newsletter of November 5th, you indicated that the agency will conduct a national safety review, to be completed in 2008, which will focus on "aviation and aerial operations, explosives and pyrotechnics, firearms, hazardous chemicals, immobilization and euthanasia, pesticides, vehicles, watercraft, and wildlife disease activities." You stated that the review will be overseen by various experts "from WS, federal and state government, and private industry."

We are writing you to strongly urge that this safety review be conducted in public view. Specifically, we call upon you to publicly lay out the methodology of this safety review, the qualifications and roles of those conducting the review and the measures that will be employed to determine whether the identified hazards have been eliminated or mitigated.

If your newly-announced review follows the pattern of past internal reviews by WS, we fear that you will simply continue to perpetuate unnecessary and unwarranted dangers to the public, the environment and to the non-target wildlife that your agency purports to serve.

As you know, Sinapu, PEER, and 25 other conservation groups had petitioned you in June 2007 and requested that WS end its aerial gunning program following the deaths of pilot Joseph Harris and gunner Glen Stevenson. They died June 1st during coyote-killing aerial gunning operations near Loa, Utah. Their deaths marked the ninth and tenth fatalities by this program. Shortly after the crash, WS halted all aerial gunning activities in order to conduct a safety review. Whether a

review actually occurred is unknown to us, but by July, WS had restarted its aerial gunning program.

In 1998, following the eighth and ninth deaths of aerial gunners involving Shane Cornwall (Spanish Fork, Utah, 1/14/98) and Lawanna Clark (Lebec, CA, 3/11/98), WS initiated a “pilot safety initiative” and stopped all aerial gunning activities. Altogether, WS experienced a total of six aircraft accidents in 1998. That year, WS also conducted a safety review.¹ Nonetheless, following this review, WS reinstated the aerial gunning program with no discernible changes and little public accountability.

All told, WS has had 51 crashes or accidents with 10 fatalities and 28 injuries but has yet to take steps addressing the underlying dangers which caused these accidents.

By contrast, on July 30, 2007, the State of South Dakota reacted to its fourth aerial-gunning crash since 1998 by grounding its fleet and conducting a thorough review as to whether it should cease aerial gunning altogether.


It appears clear that WS follows a pattern of conducting internal audits yet then repeating the same mistakes. Consequently, this time it is extremely important that the aerial gunning program be subjected to an independent review if it is to continue in any form.

In this same vein, we have also raised concerns about WS’s abuse of lethal toxicants in comment letters to your agency and in a petition to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In January 2007, Sinapu, PEER and a host of organizations petitioned to ban two kinds of predator poisons: sodium cyanide (delivered by M-44 devices) and Compound 1080 (delivered by livestock protection collars). We argued that cancellation was warranted because these pesticides, when used in accordance with widespread and commonly recognized practice, generally cause unreasonable adverse effects on the environment and pose an “imminent hazard” as defined by the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) (7 U.S.C. § 136(l)).

WS’s use of sodium cyanide and Compound 1080 has resulted in unintended deaths of numerous species and domestic pets, and put the public at unnecessary risk. For example, because WS failed to follow FIFRA use guidelines for M-44s in 2006 in Utah, and as a result, two dogs were poisoned within close proximity of their human companions. Moreover, WS has jeopardized threatened and endangered species and species of special concern, such as wolves and swift foxes, with sodium cyanide. The benefits of using these toxicants to livestock producers are low, while the risks and costs to people and wildlife (including endangered wildlife) are high.

Additionally, these toxicants pose potential biological warfare threats and threaten national security. Hydrogen cyanide has been a chemical warfare agent since World War I (Raza and Jaiswal 1994). Even in low concentrations, one can experience a variety of symptoms including headache, nausea, vomiting, and even respiratory arrest (Raza and Jaiswal 1994). Compound 1080 is colorless, odorless, tasteless, and quite water soluble; some countries have this toxin a threat to water supplies in the event of chemical warfare (Osweiler 1984). The EPA considers sodium cyanide and sodium fluoroacetate as Category 1 toxins.

¹ Although Sinapu requested those documents pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act in July 2000, they were not forwarded until October 2007. The came incomplete (i.e., the 1998 report, “Safety Review, Evaluation, and Recommendations Concerning USDA, APHIS-Wildlife Services Program” was missing) and 82 pages were redacted.



To add to our concerns, the USDA failed several audits with regards to its pesticides program. In the USDA Performance and Accountability Report for FY 2002, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that:

“APHIS could not account for 60 pounds of strychnine-treated bait and over 2,000 capsules containing sodium cyanide.” (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service - Wildlife Services 2002).

The following year, APHIS could account for these toxins, but failed to put in place an “adequate chemical inventory and tracking system.” (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Office of Inspector General 2004a). In her February 2002 statement before Congress, Joyce Fleischman, Acting Inspector General for the USDA reported:

“We found that APHIS lacks adequate accountability and control over hazardous pesticides and drugs maintained by some of its State offices for use in wildlife damage control” (Fleischman 2002).

In a 2004 OIG report, Assistant Inspector General Robert Young found that:

“WS is unable to fully account for its inventories of hazardous pesticides and controlled drugs and that these inventories are not always stored in a safe and secure manner Therefore, hazardous material remain vulnerable to undetected theft and unauthorized use, and may pose a threat to human and animal safety” (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Office of Inspector General 2004a).

So far as we can tell, Wildlife Services is still not in compliance with national safety standards. In 2005 and 2006, the USDA OIG released two audits because APHIS was not in compliance with the Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act. In the first audit of June 2005, the OIG found that APHIS had not secured “dangerous biological agents and toxins” (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Office of Inspector General 2006). In the second, the OIG found that APHIS was not complying with regulations concerning the security of toxins, that it had not secured access from unauthorized persons, that individuals using toxicants did not have adequate training, and that inventories had not been maintained to prevent the illegal possession , transfer or sale of these toxicants (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Office of Inspector General 2006).

The OIG selected 10 of 75 sites to visit, and not one was in compliance (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Office of Inspector General 2006).

USDA OIG also found that WS’s aircraft were not secured and could potentially be used in terrorist attacks (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Office of Inspector General 2004b).

These safety and security concerns are not isolated or trivial. The scope of WS operations is vast and nationwide. In 2006, according to agency figures, WS dispatched more than 1.6 million animals, the majority of which were killed by applications of highly toxic agents, such as strychnine, DRC-1339 and zinc and aluminum phosphides. The widespread use of these highly lethal chemicals is certainly a matter that WS should put front and center in any safety review.

It is for these reasons that we request that WS go far beyond its comfort zone and actually engage a broader public in an open and honest process that deals with the problems it has admitted to relative to its “aviation and aerial operations, explosives and pyrotechnics, firearms, hazardous chemicals, immobilization and euthanasia, pesticides, vehicles, watercraft, and wildlife disease activities” (WS, Stakeholder Newsletter, 11/5/07).

Due to the growing problems admitted by WS and supplemented by the concerns we have documented here and elsewhere, we ask that WS formally to spell out its review process, including but not limited to :

- Who will conduct the review and what are their qualifications?
- Will WS control the review or will the contents of the review be composed by independent experts?
- Will there be a draft report the public will have an opportunity to see and upon which it may comment?
- What is the timeframe for reviewing each of these issues? and
- How can the public be assured that these reviews will actually change policies so to protect public safety and safeguard wildlife from gratuitous carnage?

Thank you for your attention to this request. We anxiously await your reply.

Sincerely yours,



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