

NEWS RELEASE Federal wildlife-killing program challenged in Montana  
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Today, four conservation organizations challenged the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Wildlife Services predator killing program in Montana. The legal challenge also includes the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service for approving the program's killing and removal of threatened grizzly bears and targets Montana's related predator control efforts, which remain largely unregulated in the state.

Wildlife Services is a taxpayer-funded, federal program that targets and kills tens of thousands of native species in the U.S. each year, including birds, coyotes, badgers, foxes, wolves, mountain lions, black bears, and even threatened grizzly bears, largely to protect private agricultural and livestock interests. The federal program uses a variety of non-lethal and lethal methods to remove and kill species, including traps, snares, aerial gunning, and chemical poisons like M-44 sodium cyanide "bombs." In Montana, Wildlife Services also closely coordinates these efforts with two state agencies: the Montana Department of Livestock and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The lawsuit filed today maintains that Wildlife Services and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service failed to adequately consider and analyze how killing and removing dispersing grizzly bears (including females) moving between Montana's recovery zones is adversely affecting the species' long-term recovery in the region.

"The best available science reveals that the lack of connectivity and genetic interchange between grizzly bears in Montana's recovery zones and the bears' absence from the Bitterroots remains a threat to long-term recovery of the species in the lower 48 states," said Matthew Bishop, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center representing the groups. "But the agencies aren't taking this into account before killing and removing dispersing bears."

The lawsuit also asks for a thorough environmental analysis of Wildlife Services' predator killing and removal program, including its efficacy and how it combines with Montana's similar and increasingly aggressive efforts to kill predators like gray wolves to cumulatively impact predators in the state.

"Wildlife Services has once again relied on shoddy environmental analysis to rubber-stamp the killing of native carnivores on behalf of the private livestock industry," said Lizzy Pennock, carnivore coexistence advocate at WildEarth Guardians. "It's time for the program to prioritize the use of science-backed non-lethal coexistence measures instead of continuing to recklessly butcher wildlife."

Today's lawsuit follows WildEarth Guardians' successful 2019 case against Wildlife Services for relying on decades-old environmental analyses to support its predator-killing program in Montana. Settlement of that lawsuit resulted in the 2021 environmental analyses the conservation groups now challenge as inadequate. If successful, today's lawsuit would require the agencies to complete new environmental and biological analyses, and temporarily halt

Wildlife Services' unnecessary killing of grizzly bears in Montana pending compliance with the law.

"Wildlife Services continues to wipe out native predators at the behest of the livestock industry while ignoring science," said Jocelyn Leroux, Washington and Montana director with Western Watersheds Project. "These aggressive predator-killing measures only serve to throw off the balance of native ecosystems by wiping out local predator populations and catching unintended targets in the cross-hairs. The science does not support killing predators to protect livestock. Wildlife Services needs to step forward out of the Dark Ages and stop senselessly slaughtering our native wildlife."

In 2021, Wildlife Services reported that it intentionally killed more than 400,000 native animals nationwide including gray wolves and grizzly bears, and unintentionally killed more than 2,700 animals.

"This lawsuit is the first step in exposing the dirty secret of predatory animal control 'for livestock protection' on our public lands," said KC York, president and founder of Trap Free Montana. "The systematic destruction of predatory animals, enshrined in Montana statute, is as alive and well today as when it was written 100 years ago. Montanans, and all Americans, should expect better from both our state and federal wildlife agencies."

The plaintiffs on the lawsuit are WildEarth Guardians, Western Watersheds Project, and Trap Free Montana. The groups are represented by attorneys from the Western Environmental Law Center.