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ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL – NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

JAMES F. GILLET, Chief, Division of Wildlife Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USDI, Washington, D.C. 20240

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you today on behalf of the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service.

I believe animal damage control is an element of a comprehensive wildlife management program. It deals with population dynamics, mortality factors, and other management considerations. It is one of a variety of challenges faced by all wildlife managers regardless of whether they are dealing with big game, waterfowl, or even endangered species. Some question the role of, or need for, intensive management of wildlife populations in favor of a "let nature take its course" approach. These individuals fail to recognize that man is a part of the natural scene and has irreversibly changed it.

From our standpoint if we seek to maintain wildlife habitats we must be prepared to act when wildlife adversely affects other of man's interests. Equally important, the reality of man's social and economic needs cannot be overlooked. Clearly, we believe that animal damage control is a valid and necessary tool of wildlife management. This was recognized 50 years ago by the Animal Damage Control Act of 1931, and the concept, if not the letter, is still valid today. This Act directs that injurious wildlife be controlled to alleviate economic hardships, threats to livestock and threats to human health and safety.

Since 1931 we have seen many changes - not the least of which has been the change in public awareness of the environment and wildlife. And change will continue. The 1980 elections have clearly signaled the desire of the American people for change in the role played by the Federal Government. The present Administration has promised to manage our resources to meet increasing social, economic, and energy demands. There is an awareness that policy decisions and restrictions of previous Administrations have reduced the ability of our ADC Program to adequately deal with damage problems. There is also the belief and understanding that changes in existing policies are needed if we are to provide assistance for efficient utilization of our natural resources in meeting the Nation's requirements for food and fibre.

The ADC Program is a source of never-ending controversy, governed largely by emotion. What we do seems to displease everyone--we either do too much of it, or not enough of it. Animal damage control is among the most complex ecological and socio-economic issues now facing us and has become a constant focus of environmental concern. While none of us here would disagree that rational debate governed by reason and knowledge is healthy, I think all would agree that debate spawned by emotions and misconceptions does little or nothing to bring about reasonable, longlasting solutions.

The ADC controversy has markedly intensified since former Secretary Andrus issued his decision of November 8, 1979. As a result, one of Secretary Watt's first tasks was to initiate a review of existing policies, directives, and other regulations affecting the ADC Program. This review also considered research, new tools including toxicants, additional coopera-

tion, and fewer Federal restrictions as possible alternatives to more efficiently utilize our available money and manpower.

The Secretary, on September 22, commented on this review, "I have reviewed the policies of previous Administrations, plus the administrative records on which these policies are based. It appears that past Secretarial decisions have not always been based on the best available biological information." He instructed the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, "...to explore all management alternatives for the Animal Damage Control program ...delegating to you responsibility for setting the appropriate direction for that program, notwithstanding previous Secretarial policy decisions, and in line with the best currently available biological information." The Secretary also expressed to the Director his "...full confidence in the Service professionals and expect that their professionalism will guide your design and implementation of a revised Animal Damage Control Program." Secretary Watt is convinced that the utilization of expertise available within the Service will result in an efficient and responsive program which is conducted in the highest professional and scientific manner.

In addition, Secretary Watt has requested that the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies examine alternatives, and make recommendations to him as to how individual State governments can assume more responsibility for animal damage control functions. In the long term this should result in programs more responsive to localized needs with less Federal involvement.

As you are all aware, programs do not exist without funding. The ADC Program has been fortunate to be able to maintain the 1979 level of funding through FY 1981. While this translates into an overall decrease in spendable dollars because of inflation, other programs have had to adjust to significant funding reductions. In FY 1982 this Administration is committed to reducing Federal expenditures to achieve a reduced budget deficit and a reduction in the rate of inflation. Of necessity, the Service and, in turn, the ADC Program will probably receive its share of the budget cuts. Understandably, we have had to reevaluate our priorities to provide adequate funding for our most critical activities, and develop as effective and efficient a program as possible.

In terms of research, we have examined many possible methods of control in order to develop means which are selective, effective, humane, and acceptable over the long-term. Granted, some did not meet our expectations, but others show great promise. Let me discuss with you some of the new things happening in the ADC Program.

Field tests of modified steel leg-hold traps have yielded encouraging results. The Service assisted in tests of a prototype #3 double coil spring padded trap designed by the Woodstream Corporation. Following two unsuccessful field tests in late 1980, a third field test conducted in the Texas panhandle in the spring of 1981 reduced coyote foot damage significantly. Seventeen of the 20 coyotes taken sustained little or no foot damage, whereas previous studies involving unmodified traps showed moderate to severe foot damage to 85 to 90% of the coyotes. Field tests of additional prototypes are planned for this fall. The types of things to be examined will include efficacy under varying weather and soil conditions, costs, and maintenance.

To increase selectivity and humaneness, steel trap pan tension and shear pin devices attached to 3-N Victor traps have been field tested in California, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, and Utah. Again, results are encouraging. Accumulated data, consisting of 4,574 trap exposure nights, have been evaluated. The exclusion rates for five designated nontarget animals determined to be most important (gray and swift fox, striped skunk, opossum, and jackrabbit) was a combined 89% for each of the test traps but only 24% for unmodified traps. Many other nontarget rodents, furbearers, and birds were excluded at greater rates. Combined coyote capture rates were 93% for traps equipped with shear pin devices, 78% for spring equipped traps, and 98% for unmodified traps. While coyote capture rates were slightly reduced with the modified traps, the greatly reduced take of nontarget animals results in undisturbed trap sets for coyotes. The net result should be increased trap effectiveness for coyotes. Tests this year are further examining the efficacy of modified traps under diverse weather and soil conditions. On an operational basis, approximately 4,000 traps equipped primarily with the underpan leaf spring are currently being used in Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.

The implementation of the nationwide ADC Management Information System (MIS) is continuing on schedule. The system in California is now operational. Systems in Utah and Texas, which just completed their field trials, should become operational within the next 3-4 months. These three states will provide the basic ground work and necessary experience for solving problems usually associated with developing new management systems. Additional states will be added next summer if start-up problems are resolved and if money is available. Our ultimate aim is to establish a reliable information gathering system to improve the decisionmaking process and program effectiveness and efficiency.

We are also involved with the resolution of migratory bird/agricultural crop conflicts. For example, after five years of field research in North Dakota and Wyoming the Service has demonstrated that under certain conditions the use of lure crop fields can result in the cessation of waterfowl depredation complaints within a 3-5 mile radius of the lure field. We are currently working with state agricultural interests to pass this information to farmers so they can use it as one way to protect their grain crops.

In Arkansas and Louisiana intensive efforts are underway to provide assistance to rice producers experiencing losses to blackbirds. Service personnel in our Stuttgart, Arkansas, and Crowley, Louisiana, field stations are working closely with these states to alleviate damages through the use of roost relocation, livetraps, harassing techniques, and repellent chemicals. Initial field tests with Mesuro1 have indicated a high degree of protection against sprout pulling. For example, in four fields planted this year with treated rice seed the mean loss was 3% compared to an 82% mean loss in untreated fields. The highest loss in any treated field was 10%. We plan to expand this research effort and will apply for an Experimental Use Permit from EPA for the coming season.

Efforts to find a suitable repellent for use on maturing rice are continuing. Mesuro1 cannot be used because of the residue remaining on the grain at harvest time. The use of the repellent Avitrol has also proven ineffective. However, work on other methods is continuing.

The FWS is actively seeking solutions to resolve the problem of black-bird depredations to sunflowers. We have an extension/research program in North Dakota and are working closely with North Dakota State University. Some of the cooperative projects with NDSU include: (1) development of bird resistant varieties of sunflowers; (2) development of new mechanical and chemical control methods; (3) development of methods to assess blackbird damage to sunflowers; and (4) studies to better understand the population dynamics of blackbirds in relation to the sunflower crops. Avitrol, the only registered chemical for controlling damage, is being used with limited success. However, in heavily damaged fields effective tools for reducing losses do not exist.

During the lambing season in Texas, New Mexico, and Montana the ADC Program has provided assistance to livestock producers in the removal and relocation of depredating golden and bald eagles. Normally the Service uses steel leg-hold traps with padded jaws to capture eagles. New Mexico experienced an unusual eagle depredation problem this past spring and we tried some new techniques with varying degrees of success. We attempted to capture eagles using helicopters and nets. Our success, as with any new technique, was spotty. The key elements in this technique is cool air, a fast, maneuverable helicopter and the ability to keep the eagle below the aircraft. In Texas we were able to continue work and capture four eagles in four hours. We recognize that we need to learn more about eagle behavior, the cause of conflicts, and methods to deal more effectively with this problem.

What does the future hold? One thing is certain -- solutions will not come easily. Limited funding is forcing us to insure that high priority areas receive adequate funding. Clearly, these belt-tightening efforts will continue for the foreseeable future. The ADC Program in the Department of the Interior, however, is alive and well in spite of the many obstacles facing us. We are moving forward with the refinement of existing tools and the development of new tools which, we feel, will make our efforts more effective. That is not to say that we, the FWS alone, can achieve significant goals for animal damage control. We cannot. It will take dedicated and cooperative efforts with USDA's Extension Service, APHIS, the states, and local governments. We must work with researchers at universities and colleges and not the least of all, those who suffer damage. It must be a cooperative venture. If we all work together we can achieve the goal of protecting and enhancing our fish and wildlife resources while providing animal damage control sensitive to the needs of livestock and agricultural interests, and the nation.