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FEDERAL COURT INJUNCTION STOPS LETHAL PROGRAM AIMED AT SAGE GROUSE PREDATORS

A federal court in Boise, Idaho has halted the killing of badgers, ravens, coyotes and other native animals by Wildlife Services (formerly Animal Damage Control). In February 2001, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission had authorized Wildlife Services to exterminate predators of sage grouse in areas of Owyhee County, the Little Lost River Valley and the Curlew Valley. In mid-March, a coalition of conservation groups, including The Committee for Idaho's High Desert (CIHD), Idaho Conservation League (ICL) and Predator Defense Institute (PDI), filed a lawsuit against Wildlife Services and BLM to halt the broad-scale killing of native wildlife. The project involved aerial gunning, trapping, hunting and baits to kill mammals, plus placing poison eggs in fake nests to kill ravens and other birds. The use of deadly M-44s (sodium cyanide) was also considered.

In arguments to the Court, Wildlife Services and BLM claimed that many impacts of the Idaho project were covered in older environmental documents dealing with programs to kill problem predators of livestock. Plus, the agencies asserted that the predator elimination project was "routine" and "research", so it fell under Wildlife Service's "Categorical Exclusion" regulations. Those regulations normally apply to laboratory work, or production of sterile insects.

"The Court today ruled that going out and killing numerous animal species across large swaths of southern Idaho could not occur without regard for the environment and wildlife. The Court therefore ordered this predator killing program to be stopped. We are very pleased that Wildlife Service's killing spree has been called off," said Attorney Gretchen Biggs of the Animal Law Center.

"This is a clear message that Wildlife Services, BLM and the Idaho Fish and Game Commission must obey the law, and stop evading open scrutiny of lethal actions that endanger the environment, rare species, and recreational users of our public lands," said Attorney Laird Lucas of the Land and Water Fund in Boise.

Wildlife Biologist Ted Chu of the ICL Board noted: "This ruling denies the deceptively named Wildlife Services agency an opportunity to expand their same old day to day business of killing the public's wildlife, in this case under the new guise of wildlife management and scientific research. The court should be commended for seeing so clearly through this charade."

Brooks Fahy, Director of the Predator Defense Institute, noted that Wildlife Services uses public funds on public lands to kill publicly owned wildlife, primarily as a subsidy to the public lands livestock industry. "We can't save sage grouse by poisoning, trapping, and shooting other native wildlife --- we simply need to take better care of sagebrush country throughout the West. This project, cloaked as 'research,' was simply an effort to distract attention from the real problems of livestock overgrazing and habitat loss that are causing sage grouse populations to plummet," commented Katie Fite of the Committee for Idaho's High Desert.