Plenary Session

Current Trends and the Future of Private Sector Nuisance Wildlife Control

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ABSTRACT Private sector vertebrate control continually interacts with many parties—all with a genuine interest in wildlife, and thus, the industry is always changing. In recent years, people expressed a desire for more humane treatment of animals and environmentally responsible control methods. The industry has also focused on vertebrates besides birds and rodents and is working to have the opportunity to handle species that are currently excluded from permit systems in some states. In the 1990s, there was rapid growth of private sector wildlife control businesses across the U.S., and increasingly, pest control companies added wildlife services in response to customer demands. Efforts were made to curb instances when Wildlife Services competed with private pest management companies and Wildlife Services took on new responsibilities, including wildlife enhancement and pesticide monitoring, as opposed to control-oriented functions. Despite changes to the industry, wildlife damage management has always functioned on two basic premises: 1) all native animals are resources of inherent interest and value to the people of the United States; and 2) local population control is an essential part of wildlife damage management.

KEY WORDS animal protection, urban wildlife, welfare assessment, wildlife services

Over the last year, the United States has faced record gas prices, the stock market crash, the housing bubble burst, failed banks, automakers on the brink of bankruptcy, and the continued involvement in two wars. Moreover, 75,000 retail locations are projected to close in the first half of 2009, resulting in even more layoffs. However, wild animals are not aware of the recession and the homeowner with mice in the kitchen understands that it is a necessity, not a luxury, to get rid of them. Therefore, in that respect, we are in a fairly recession-proof industry.

Over the last 27 years of my involvement in wildlife control, private sector vertebrate control has included rodent and bird control, large vertebrate trapping, prevention and repair of animal damage, habitat modification and exclusion, and municipal animal control. We work at the interface of many parties with a genuine interest in wildlife, such as pest control operators, animal control operators (ACOs), government agencies, nuisance wildlife control operators, animal welfare groups, and the general public. Many basic skills related to wildlife control are attributable to fur trapping, but private sector wildlife control has matured rapidly over the last 20 years and the skills needed to service the public have changed as well. Many states still require nuisance wildlife control operators to hold a virtually unrelated or antiquated trapping permits or licenses to control wildlife. In the future, these states will require vertebrate control as a special license category, with requirements for testing, licensing, and general liability insurance. It should be noted that insurance is not available solely to protect the wildlife control agents but also to protect our customers and the general public. To do business without general liability insurance passes risks onto consumers without their consent.

Humane societies and animal shelters are often not funded or staffed with volunteers trained to handle the volume of wildlife conflicts that arise. Moreover, animal welfare interests sometimes promote ‘idealistic’ solutions versus the ‘realistic’ solutions needed to timely and cost-effectively deal
with situations encountered on a daily basis. That being said, there are legitimate concerns by animal welfare groups that need to be acknowledged. We need to recognize that green, environmentally-friendly, and humaneness are not just buzz-words but rather future trends for this industry. People desire immediate and effective solutions to wildlife problems while, at the same time, being assured that wild animals are handled humanely. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) has recognized this and responded with a Humane Wildlife Services program. Similarly, Critter Control has responded with our own national ‘Critter Safe’ service offering. Because of current ordinances and regulations along with the impacts of animal welfare and animal rights groups, there are more rigid constraints on the tools and techniques that can be utilized to address wildlife damage problems today. The U.S. Technical Advisory Group for trap standards brought about changes and best management practices on all types of traps to address these concerns.

While governmental wildlife damage control (i.e., USDA, APHIS, Wildlife Services [WS]) has historically consisted of primarily agricultural related complaints in rural areas, there has been a trend in recent years to provide wildlife services in urban areas, often in competition with nuisance wildlife control operators and pest control operators. Last year, the National Pest Management Association (NPMA) signed a memorandum of understanding with WS aimed at curbing instances when WS competes with private pest management companies for nuisance bird work. The purpose of this memorandum of understanding is 1) to establish procedures to assist WS personnel and NPMA members in carrying out their respective wildlife damage management roles and activities; 2) to strengthen the cooperative approach to wildlife damage management; 3) to develop further working relationships; and 4) to identify and implement strategies to minimize competition between WS and private sector pest management companies. Wildlife damage management must be performed in a professional manner and a win-win situation exists through increased communication and cooperation. This is not inconsistent with the federal government’s policy of cooperating with private entities regarding wildlife damage management over the last 40 years.

In 1964 the “Predator & Rodent Control in the United States” study, better known as the Leopold Report, supported its findings with two basic premises: 1) all native animals are resources of inherent interest and value to the people of the United States; and 2) local population control is an essential part of a wildlife damage management policy. It noted that, ‘Control should be limited to the troublesome species, preferably to the troublesome individuals, and in any event to the localities where substantial damage or danger exists.’ Federal and state agencies provide critical services for public health related problems, such as avian influenza, and crop damage in an effort to protect our country’s food supplies while local nuisance wildlife problems are best left to nuisance wildlife control operators and pest control operators.

These premises reflected the principles of both conservation and preservation and became guidelines for USDA policy. Wildlife Services took on new responsibilities, including wildlife enhancement and pesticide monitoring, as opposed to control-oriented functions. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) director John Gottschalk stated at the time: “What has really been at stake is a fundamental change in the conservation movement—a change in the way we view and deal with animals that become troublesome. We are not dealing simply with a change in a federal bureau, but
a change in public attitudes that touches emotions and pocketbooks.” Even 45 years ago, federal agencies saw the importance of the changing environmental movement and moved towards increased professionalism.

Public perceptions about the need to manage overabundant wildlife populations have been heightened by significant increases in populations of Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), beaver (*Castor canadensis*), and other wildlife species. In 1989, I chaired the NPMA Vertebrate Control Committee. This marked the beginning of the pest control industry focusing on vertebrates besides birds and rodents and a call for environmentally responsible control methods, such as having pest control operators stop using Rozol tracking powder on bats. Instead, we educated pest control operators on the use of bat check-valves for managing bat colonies. There was rapid growth of private sector wildlife control businesses across the United States in the 1990s, and increasingly, pest control companies began adding wildlife services in response to customer requests to handle ‘all of their pests’. This reflected both the increasing number of human-wildlife conflicts as well as the willingness by property owners to pay for such services.

How most people feel about wildlife damage management is largely dependent on whether they have experienced damage problems. If they have not personally experienced wildlife damage, it is unlikely that they understand the problems or the frustrations experienced by those who have had problems. It is easier to make a judgment that a nuisance alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) in a backyard in Florida should be removed than a deer from a backyard in suburban New York. The alligator is perceived as a human health or safety problem and is ugly. Deer, however, are perceived as cute and cuddly (e.g., “Bambi syndrome”), even though they may present a health hazard. Most people want animals that are causing problems removed and not killed, but people’s tolerance for wildlife damage or threats to their health and safety decreases dramatically based on the extent of the damage or when threats increase and nonlethal or alternative control methods have been ineffective. This reflects the complexity of wildlife damage management and the issues that those working in the industry must learn to address.

In the future, we must:

1. Continue to develop effective wildlife damage management programs that provide social, economic, and environmental benefits to wildlife resources, individuals, and society.
2. Continue to monitor, evaluate, and be proactive in addressing changes based on valid research, good science, and common sense to meet the changing needs of society.
3. Continue to support and encourage increased cooperation and coordination among users of wildlife damage management information, education, technical assistance, and operational programs.
4. Continue to demonstrate that wildlife damage management is an integral and essential part of wildlife management to the wildlife profession, other agencies, and the public.
5. Continue to develop new and more effective technologies for wildlife damage assessment, prevention, control, relocation, and euthanasia. We need to understand the human dimensions of wildlife damage management within the parameters of increasingly more stringent environmental regulations. We must also recognize the decreasing public acceptance and increasing concern.
about the use of pesticides and a variety of other previously effective and acceptable tools and techniques.

6. Remember that although wildlife resources are a public trust, over two-thirds of the wildlife habitat in the United States exists on private lands. Therefore, we must accept responsibility as wildlife professionals to inform and assist private landowners in effectively managing their lands to maintain and enhance wildlife habitat while keeping wildlife damage within tolerable levels and consistent with the landowner’s objectives.

7. Continue to be honest, proactive, visionary, and responsive to the challenges of the future amid the changes that will be necessary to ensure professional capability and credibility. We need not be apologetic for what we do; however, we must always strive to maintain and improve, when possible, our ethics and professionalism in achieving our objectives.

8. Become more knowledgeable and effective in addressing diseases and health threats transmitted and hosted by wildlife that affect humans, domestic animals, and public safety (J. E. Miller, Mississippi State University, personal communication).

We also need to better understand the public tolerance aspect of wildlife health and safety threats, whether it be deer-vehicle collisions, Lyme disease, or bird strikes with aircraft. Bird-aircraft strike hazards continue to be a major concern with the potential for catastrophic losses of human lives, not to mention financial costs. Just two weeks ago, under intense public pressure, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) agreed to release reports on bird-aircraft encounters, which have climbed dramatically since the 1990s due to growing populations of large birds, such as geese, cormorants, and pelicans.

From a private sector standpoint, four main areas of concern are: 1) humane animal handling and public relations; 2) insurance requirements for accountability; 3) testing, licensing, permits, and continuing education for credibility and professional development; and 4) an opportunity to handle species which are currently excluded from permit systems.

Approximately 21 states currently require some type of licensing/exams and this number will continue to rise. Currently, many states have conflicting rules, whereby one agency allows control of a species and another agency does not. Texas just approved a bill to exempt certain activities from pest control licensing, such as removing animals from chimneys, using live traps to remove animals from buildings, and using exclusion to prevent infestation by animals. Last September, the U.S. Court of Appeals sided with Alan Merrifield, who sued the State of California, alleging that their pest control licensing law restricted his right to make a living because he was being regulated by special interest laws even though he did not use pesticides in his wildlife control business. The court said the previous laws unfairly limited the economic freedom of start-up businesses in order to protect the economic interests of existing pest control companies, which constituted unfair competition.

The private sector also wants an opportunity to handle species that are currently excluded from permit systems in some states, such as deer, beaver, waterfowl, raptors, and alligators. While regulations and the availability of permits vary among states, there should be some consistency, especially for federal permits. The private sector contributes greatly to the high level of professionalism in wildlife damage control.
management and are deserving of opportunities to provide a wide range of services to the public.

Private sector pest management professionals need to keep the following in mind: 1) be familiar with the local, state, and federal regulations; 2) be familiar with wildlife-related diseases; 3) understand that it takes special skills and there are specific risks to many urban wildlife problems, such as working on ladders, in attics, etc.; and 4) know that traditional pest control companies are raising the bar of professionalism in private sector wildlife control; and 5) wild animals must be treated humanely.

While environmentally friendly and green are the current buzz-words, let us remember wildlife damage management professionals started on this path 45 years ago with the Leopold Report and its two basic premises: 1) all native animals are resources of inherent interest and value to the people of the U.S.; and 2) local population control is an essential part of a wildlife damage management.