

## **Wildlife Services and the New Administration**

WILLIAM H. CLAY, *USDA, APHIS, Wildlife Services, Washington, D.C., USA*

**ABSTRACT** To understand what can be expected from President Obama and the new Administration, we can look at past behavior. As a Senator, Obama served on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee showing great interest in environmental issues. He believes that federally-funded scientific research should play an important role in advancing science and technology. Moreover, President Obama has declared that decisions in his Administration will be made based on science and not politics. However, the biggest change from the new Administration is emphasis on making the government work more efficiently and at a reduced cost. During the next 4 years, Wildlife Services will become increasingly involved with feral swine problems, wildlife hazards at airports, and wildlife disease monitoring in addition to the traditional livestock protection and other wildlife damage programs that are currently underway. With the deficit continuing to grow, we will likely see reductions in our budgets, and the challenge will be to identify ways to cut back on other areas of spending in order to maintain the services we provide.

**KEY WORDS** change, earmarks, Obama Administration, Wildlife Services

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this morning about Wildlife Services (WS) and the new Administration—what we can expect during the next four years and what are some of the wildlife damage issues that we will be involved with during this Administration over the next 4 years.

The mantra for the Obama Administration, and especially during the Presidential campaign, focused heavily on the need for change. This emphasis on change affected me directly. On 21 January, Inauguration Day, I began what has turned out to be an extended detail in the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Administrator's office as the Acting Associate Administrator. Cindy Smith, the APHIS Administrator, is serving as the Acting Under Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Marketing and Regulatory Programs, and Kevin Shea, the real Associate Administrator, is now the Acting APHIS Administrator. Since I am now in the Administrator's office, Martin Mendoza is currently serving as the Acting Deputy Administrator for WS.

These Acting assignments are common during a new Administration to allow time for political appointments to be made and to get established. The new USDA Secretary, Tom Vilsack, was nominated by President-Elect Obama on 17 December 2008 and was unanimously confirmed by the Senate on 20 January, so he was actually in place in USDA before President Obama was sworn in on 21 January. On 23 April, the Secretary nominated Edward Avalos to be the Under Secretary for the Marketing and Regulatory Program in USDA and, assuming that he is confirmed by the Senate, Cindy, Kevin, and I will all go back to our regular jobs. Although we were initially told that these acting assignments would just be for 3 to 4 weeks, it looks like they will actually turn out to be more like 4 months. Mr. Avalos is currently the marketing director at the New Mexico Department of Agriculture and has been with them for the last 30 years.

It is really a little early to get a good read on what we can expect from the President and the new Administration. The President has only been in office for 106 days, so to get some idea of where he stands on certain

issues that may affect us, we have to look back to his position during the campaign or what has actually been posted on the White House web page. The most obvious way to look at what we might expect is to look at some of the issues that the President was concerned with while a Senator. To start with, he served on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee his first two years in the Senate—showing great interest in environmental issues. He introduced or co-sponsored legislation aimed at curbing global warming and climate change, reducing the amount of mercury deposited into water bodies, and banned lead in children's toys. He also pressured the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to expedite the adoption of rules to safeguard children from exposure to lead paint, and he worked to prevent invasive species such as Asian carp from inhabiting the Great Lakes. He has definitely been involved in environmental issues in the past.

President Obama is the first President since at least President Bush in 1988 that did not grow up hunting and fishing, and this has caused some concern primarily among hunters. However, despite that, on the White House web page under the President's Agenda for the next 4 years, the President does recognize that hunters and anglers are a key constituency group that have played a major role in conservation and wildlife management over the years and must take an active role and have a powerful voice if we are to deal with the conservation challenges that we face.

Concerning the importance of science, he recognizes that, in the past, government funding for scientific research has yielded innovations that has resulted in new technologies and even put a man on the moon. He recognizes that today we have a new set of challenges including energy security and climate change, yet he feels the United States is losing its scientific

dominance. Over the last 30 years, federal funding for the physical, mathematical, and engineering sciences has declined at a time when other countries are substantially increasing their own research budgets. He believes that federally-funded scientific research should play an important role in advancing science and technology in the classroom and in the lab.

During the presidential campaign in 2007, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) Legislative Fund developed a Presidential questionnaire that was provided to Senator Obama's campaign consisting of 25 questions regarding various animal welfare issues involving wildlife and farm animals to get an idea of his position on these issues if he was ultimately elected. The 25 questions could be answered either yes, no, or not sure. Examples of the questions were, "Will you support legislation to prohibit internet hunting? Will you support legislation to prohibit "canned hunts?" Will you support continued funding for adequate enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act?, Will you support continued funding for wildlife conservation and habitat protection programs? For 24 of the 25 questions, Senator Obama answered "Yes" and one other he answered "Not Sure." The only question that he answered "Not Sure" was about requiring that the federal government only purchase food from producers who meet certain humane farming standards. One of the questions they asked was on lethal predator control and WS. As background to that question, they stated that USDA's WS program kills 1.7 million animals each year as a government subsidy for private ranchers. Government agents use traps, poisons, aerial gunning, and other inhumane methods of killing coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, bears, and other predators—at a cost to taxpayers of about \$10 million annually. Their question was "Will you support a reduction in funding for lethal predator

control, so that the USDA will shift its resources toward nonlethal management of predators when possible?"

President Obama went on record as answering "Yes". However, the question on WS was the only question in the entire survey, where he went on to specifically clarify his answer saying "I would work to ensure that the WS program complete its work in the most humane, environmentally sound way possible. That should include studying nonlethal management of predators. However, in the absence of WS, ranchers would have to take on the responsibility for controlling predators on their own, with the potential for haphazard and dangerous application of poisons and traps or overhunting of predators that are a critical component of western ecosystems. While the actions of the WS program certainly need oversight and improvement in areas where nonlethal methods may be more effective, the agency does have an important role in minimizing conflict between those who use our lands for their agricultural values and those who place a premium on wildlife habitat and wild lands."

It's clear from his response, or at least the response from his staff that may have answered these questions, that we need to do a better job in WS communicating our research programs through the National Wildlife Research Center and our emphasis on nonlethal methods development. For the last 15 years or so, we have spent about 75% of our research budget (about \$13 million a year) on nonlethal methods development. Such research has led to the development of new repellents such as methyl anthranilate, egg-laying inhibitors for pigeons and Canada geese such as nicarbazin, new scare tactics such as laser lights to disperse roosting birds, siren and strobe frightening devices to deter predators, research on immunocontraception, and many more. What we need to do a better job of is communicating these methods, both

the advantages and disadvantages, to the public as well as our own employees. Towards this end, we have recently filled a new position in WS called a Resource Management Specialist. Mike Marlow, formerly a wildlife disease biologist with our program in Oklahoma, was selected for this position and will be working out of our Western Regional Office in Ft. Collins, Colorado effective 24 May. Mike's main area of responsibility will include being the WS resident expert on various nonlethal methods, with a particular emphasis on predator control. He will not be a salesman for nonlethal methods, but will be expected to be familiar with the latest nonlethal research and nonlethal management methods and communicate that information not only to our own WS employees, but also to livestock producers, industry groups, and the general public. Overall, I was encouraged by President Obama's response to the question about WS, and his recognition that the issue of lethal predator control needs more explanation than just simply a yes or a no.

Two significant decisions have already come from the Obama Administration affecting the WS program. As many of you know, a number of environmental organizations led by WildEarth Guardians petitioned the EPA in January 2007 to cancel the use of sodium cyanide in the M-44 devices and 1080 used in the Livestock Protection Collar (LPC). These groups made a number of allegations saying that these chemicals posed a direct threat to people and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species; that they were causing significant environmental harm; that WS had no accountability and could not track the use of these chemicals; and that they posed a direct threat to our nation's homeland security if terrorists were to gain hold of these toxicants. EPA took two years to solicit public comments and review the information and data on these two chemicals. On 27

January of this year, they announced that their decision was to deny the petition from WildEarth Guardians to ban these chemicals. The EPA stated in their response that their review indicated that these chemicals did not pose any substantial threat to people, pets, threatened and endangered species, or the environment when used according to the label directions; and that they consulted with officials from the Homeland Security Department who also concurred that these chemicals did not pose a threat to this country's security. The EPA response went on to say that it appears that the petition was in opposition to lethal control of predators in general and not just concern about sodium cyanide and 1080.

On 30 January, 3 days after receiving word that the EPA had denied their petition to cancel these 2 chemicals, WildEarth Guardians asked that the new EPA Administrator, Lisa Jackson, review their decision in light of the new Administration's environmental policies to determine if they concurred with the previous decision, which was made largely under the Bush Administration. In late March, EPA upheld their original determination. That was good news for WS because the M-44 device and the LPC are two of the most target specific tools that we use. The irony is that these tools were researched and developed back in the 1970s in response to critics who said that WS needed to make our control tools more target specific. M-44s are canid specific and the LPCs only kill coyotes that are actively in the process of killing livestock when they bite their throats. You cannot get much more target specific than that.

Another decision from the Obama Administration came in March when the new Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, concurred with the Bush Administration on the need to delist wolves from the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) removed

wolves from ESA protection in 2008 and were immediately sued by a number of wildlife and animal welfare organizations. A judge reversed the delisting, placing them back under Federal protection.

The recent decision to again propose delisting of the wolves outraged many environmental and other organizations who threatened to sue the USFWS alleging that the delisting was a violation of ESA. I do not believe a lawsuit has actually been filed at this time, but if that happens, time will tell what the final decision by the courts will be on this issue. President Obama has said several times that decisions in his Administration will be based on science and not politics. In the view of many in the professional wildlife management community, the EPA decision and the recent proposal to delist wolves were clearly based on the science at hand.

While this was going on, animal activist groups started sending letters to different individuals in the government regarding the WS program. In January of this year, a wildlife advocacy group called Big Wildlife sent a letter signed by 100 organizations to then Secretary of Agriculture nominee Tom Vilsack urging him to stop the mass extermination of wildlife caused by WS. In February, WildEarth Guardians sent a letter signed by 60 animal activist organizations to Peter Orzag, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, urging him to eliminate the funding for the WS program. The livestock industry countered with letters also signed by a number of industry groups and organizations, about 117 in all, that were in support of WS. So you have this going back and forth, which is common, particularly at the beginning of a new Administration.

A better way to determine how much the Administration and Congress support wildlife management and wildlife damage management is by the funding that is



provided to the federal agencies. The fiscal year 2010 budget will be released later this week, so we should get a better idea of what is in the President's budget and what the focus of the new Administration's priorities for WS will be.

During the last Presidential campaign, there was a lot of discussion regarding Congressional earmarks or directives and the need to eliminate these from the Federal budget process. Although both Presidential candidates, at the time Senator McCain and Senator Obama, made a pledge to eliminate earmarks if they were elected, Senator McCain made a bigger issue of it and campaigned a lot on the need to eliminate waste and pork in the government. This was not good news for WS because a large part of the funding that we get from Congress was in the form of earmarks—items such as funding for brown tree snake control activities in Guam, wolf damage management in Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, beaver work in Mississippi and North Carolina, blackbird control in the Dakotas to protect sunflowers, etc. Most of these are either state-specific or specific to a certain region in the United States. While Brown Tree Snake control may not be considered a high priority for people living in New York City, it is a serious problem for people living in Guam who have to live with the power outages and environmental damage that has occurred there and which also threatens the ecological communities in Hawaii. Funding to deal with wolf predation in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming is a high priority for livestock producers in those areas but taxpayers in Florida may consider that an example of pork – just as people in the states with wolves would consider any funding provided to eradicate giant Gambian pouched rats in the Florida Keys or nutria in Maryland as a waste of money.

It is too early to tell whether or not we will see direct reductions in our

Congressional earmarks, but obviously, any reduction to any earmark that we have in WS will negatively affect our ability to protect that resource. As most of you know, the stimulus package that was approved in March by the President and Congress contained about 8,000 earmarks. President Obama indicated that he did not approve, but his first priority was to get the stimulus package through Congress and implemented and in later budget years, he would deal with the issue of earmarks. Since that time, there has been a considerable amount of pushback from some members of Congress, who understand the need for earmarks and whose constituents rely on them to help address serious problems. While earmarks in general are often considered pork by the media and some special interest groups, how many of these same people that fly would consider Federal funding used to prevent bird/aircraft strikes as pork? While some people may have previously considered this a waste of taxpayers' money, U.S. Airways Flight 1549 that landed in the Hudson River in January because of multiple goose strikes made many people reconsider the value of these kinds of programs.

When you look at the different kinds of earmarks that WS receives, it's clear that there is a need, whether it is a local need, a regional need, or a national need. As the debate on earmarks continued earlier this year, some members of Congress, including many influential Democratic members, took the position that these were beneficial and they would continue to seek funding to support those in their Districts. Just 2 weeks ago, President Obama directed his cabinet to reduce federal spending by \$100 million this year. This will obviously affect many of the current Federal programs in place—whether or not it directly affects WS, we will have to wait and see.

Three of the fastest expanding areas that WS will be involved in during this

Administration involve feral swine, our work at airports to reduce wildlife/aircraft strikes, and our wildlife disease monitoring and surveillance activities. Dealing with requests to control feral swine damage is one of the fastest growing areas that I have seen during my career with WS. In Texas over the last 3 years, our total feral swine take has increased about 30% a year, and for the first time in our program's history, we have taken more feral swine in Texas than coyotes. Our coyote take in Texas represents about 20% of our national take. Last year, we took just over 18,000 coyotes. That same year, we took 18,895 feral swine. This year, WS personnel in Texas estimate that they will take over 25,000 feral swine. Damage is caused to livestock, crops, natural resources like ground-nesting birds and nesting sea turtles, and public health. The *E. coli* outbreak in spinach in Salinas Valley, California that killed 3 people and put over 25 people in the hospital was traced back to feral swine in the fields. Over 16% of the samples that we take from our feral swine wildlife damage management activities around the country are positive for pseudorabies and 4% are positive for swine brucellosis. They also cause a considerable amount of property damage to fences, deer feeders, and turf areas. Look at the media coverage of the new human H1N1 flu strain, incorrectly referred to as "swine flu" and incorrectly attributed to swine, that has been in the news. In the past, much of the media has decided that any programs to control feral swine are ones that they can get a laugh out of by characterizing them as "true pork." Helicopters used to control feral swine are referred to in the media as "pork choppers." While references like these may be amusing to some and a clever play on words, it tends to leave the reader or viewer with the impression that feral swine and the damage they can cause are not a serious issue.

There has also been a considerable amount of interest in the issue of bird/aircraft strikes around the country following the "miracle on the Hudson" that occurred in January. In just 24 hours following that crash, more people became aware of the serious problem of bird and other wildlife strikes at airports than there has been over the last 20 years. While it has been a particular challenge for us to receive federal funding to deal with this problem, our cooperative airport funding is now about \$12 million dollars and continuing to increase. Although there were Congressional hearings on the issue of wildlife/aircraft strikes following the crash in January, from my perspective it seemed to focus on issues like the need for new radar systems or the way that wildlife strikes are being reported (being a voluntary system rather than a mandatory system) and ignored the issue of what should be done to keep birds away from airports. Two weeks ago, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was directed to release the information that they had regarding bird strikes at airports around the country. This information was previously not available to the public, but following the U.S. Airways crash in New York, numerous members of the media attempted to get this information through the Freedom of Information Act. FAA's position was that the release of this information could cause pilots and others to stop reporting wildlife strikes and I am sure that airport managers and airport personnel certainly did not want to advertise the fact that birds may be a problem at their airports. The Department of Transportation Secretary, Ray LaHood, overruled FAA's concerns citing that withholding this information was inconsistent with the President's policy on transparency in the government.

Our wildlife disease monitoring and surveillance program has also rapidly expanded during the last 5 years. In 2003, we

received enough funding to hire 23 wildlife disease biologists. In 2007, we hired an additional 21 disease biologists. We have been directly involved in working with state wildlife and agricultural agencies in the monitoring of chronic wasting disease, bovine tuberculosis, West Nile virus, plague, avian influenza, and many others. For the past several years, we have monitored over 23 wildlife diseases around the country. We developed a North American Rabies Management Plan to better address and coordinate the management of rabies from a North American perspective, involving Canada and Mexico in addition to the United States. In addition, a comprehensive migratory bird monitoring and surveillance system was designed and implemented in cooperation with state wildlife agencies, the USFWS, and United States Geological Survey in all 4 of the major flyways in the United States for the early detection of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza. Within the last few weeks, you have probably seen increasing concern regarding the new strain of influenza that is a mix of human, avian, and swine influenzas. This makes it clear that wildlife diseases are an important issue and one that we will continue to be involved in.

One of the biggest challenges that we will face during the next 4 years is acquiring the resources that will be needed to address these new growth areas, specifically feral swine problems, wildlife disease issues, and wildlife hazards at airports, as well as the traditional livestock protection and other wildlife damage programs that we are actively involved in. Considering the growing deficit, I am afraid that we will not be seeing increases in our budgets and rather reductions. President Obama and the new Administration are also stressing the importance of taxpayer accountability and the efficient use of taxpayer funds. This is all good—we should be efficient with the

federal funding that we are allocated and we definitely should be accountable to the public. In the early part of this Administration, there has been a considerable amount of emphasis on reducing travel and identifying other ways to save funding which can perhaps be used more effectively in other parts of the program. This emphasis will continue and will affect our WS-sponsored meetings as well as the industry-type meetings such as this one, the Wildlife Society, Vertebrate Pest Conference, Bird Strike Committee meetings, and meetings of that nature. There is no question that there will be a need to reduce our attendance at many of these meetings in a continuing effort to save funding. This emphasis on reduced travel will directly affect us in WS. Meetings such as this one are good ways to network, hear new ideas and approaches to wildlife damage management issues, learn of new and ongoing research, and encourage professional development. The challenge that we now face in WS is how to continue our participation in these kinds of meetings, while at the same time, recognizing an ongoing effort to use the tax dollars that we receive as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Many states that provide cooperative funding to WS to conduct activities are reducing the amount of funding that they have previously provided. With no increased federal funding likely to offset the loss of some of the cooperative state funding that we received from state departments of agriculture, state departments of natural resources, departments of health, etc., we will have to reduce the number of services that we can provide unless we can identify other sources of funding such as those recognized by cutting back on travel to conferences or other meetings of this type.

To summarize, although we are just three and a half months into the new Administration, we have seen a commitment

to the need to manage wildlife damage, have had two significant decisions made by the Administration with the M-44/LPC and wolf decisions that support the continued need for wildlife damage management, and we have seen an increased emphasis on transparency, accountability, reducing federal budgets, and ethics. The biggest change that I see from our new Administration is the emphasis on making the government work more efficiently and at a reduced cost. I do not expect to see large budget increases for our

program in the future and I would consider us lucky to maintain the federal funding that we currently have. Our challenge for the future will be to manage the ongoing and new wildlife damage management conflicts that we face within existing budgets. This will undoubtedly require more innovative ways of doing business and will lead to closer working relationships with wildlife organizations and private industry in a cooperative effort to achieve this.