

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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WYOMING EAGLE CASE BROKEN,

INTERIOR ANNOUNCES, BUT STRONGER MEASURES NEEDED IN THE FUTURE

Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton and Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks Nathaniel P. Reed today praised the prompt action of Wyoming State authorities in arresting five men in connection with recent poisonings of American eagles in Jackson Canyon, near Casper, Wyoming.

The arrests were made under State law. There is, at present, insufficient evidence that Federal laws were violated in the case, the Interior officials said.

"The Governor of Wyoming has cooperated magnificently with the Fish and Wildlife Service in this case," Reed said, "but it demonstrates that tougher agency actions and tighter laws are needed to protect America's national bird and other species in danger of extinction."

Prosecution in the Wyoming poisonings might not have been possible at all if the bait -- presumably set out for coyotes, not eagles -- had not consisted of antelope, allegedly shot out of season, Reed said.

"There is other evidence that we have a lot of work to do," Reed said. "We have new reports of 37 dead eagles under a 12-mile stretch of power line in Moffat County, Colorado, with electrocution suspected as the cause, and 17 more dead eagles under power lines in the Pawnee National Grassland in Weld County, Colorado."

Secretary Morton is asking all Interior agencies to look more closely into all of their activities to see what can be done to guard eagles and other imperiled species against accidental hazards as well as intentional killing.

"As the West's largest single landlord, we have an obligation to give the entire question the most thorough review at all levels of authority," Reed stated.

The Wyoming case began with the discovery of a number of eagle carcasses. Forty-nine have been discovered in Wyoming to date. Of these, 21 died from poisoning. But the case, ironically, could not be based on the dead eagles.

"Under Federal law," Reed said, "we would have had to prove that the killings were deliberate and intentional.

"In this case it is not clearcut that eagles were the intended target. Instead, there is reason to believe the intention was to poison coyotes, which are not a protected species. The eagles happened to feed on the carcasses of several antelope which had been shot out of season. The carcasses had been baited with thallium -- which has not been in general use by our Fish and Wildlife Service for over 15 years -- and there is evidence that the eagles fed on those carcasses.

"Thus, the strongest case to be made here is that antelope apparently were shot out of season. It might not have been possible for any governmental jurisdiction -- State, Federal, or local -- to take action to halt this kind of practice if the baited meat had been a domestic animal," Reed said.

He said the work of Wyoming authorities on the case is "an excellent example of close Federal-State cooperation."

Throughout the investigation, Federal game agents worked with Wyoming officials, and with concerned private citizens, Reed explained. Eighteen of the dead eagles were autopsied by Interior's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife wildlife research laboratories at Patuxent, Maryland; one had been shot, but the other seventeen contained lethal quantities of thallium.

Four other dead specimens were autopsied by the University of Wyoming, aided by a Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife biologist from Denver. Again, thallium was identified as the cause of death.

One of the alleged participants in the eagle poisoning incident is a non-Federal cooperator employee who provides services under general supervision of the Wildlife Services division of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife in control of predators that unduly menace livestock. The employee, paid with State and county funds, has been suspended from providing further cooperative services pending the outcome of the case.

"We are also concerned about the larger question of the use of poisons in predator control, and we will be looking deeply into that," stated Reed.

The hazards to wildlife of electric power transmission lines are part of the picture, including those which are not managed by Interior agencies, Reed said. "Many if not most such lines cross public or Indian lands in the West and we are taking a careful look into this problem and will see that corrective measures are taken where possible."

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