

Environment

Gresham dog dies in Conibear trap set out to catch nutria

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Bruce Ely, The Oregonian

Doug and

Denise McCurtain stand at the pond near their Gresham home where they found their dog in a trap set out to catch nutria. The dog died.

GRESHAM -- A family whose border collie was killed by a wildlife trap near their home last summer says a federal agency recklessly set it in an area frequented by children and pets and failed to warn the public of the danger of the heavy-duty trap used.

The agency that set the trap says the neighborhood association asked it to control an infestation of

[nutria](#)

. Warnings were emailed and posted to keep people and pets away, and

Conibear traps

were set after caged traps didn't work, according to the director of the U.S.

Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Service

s Portland office.

An attorney representing Doug and Denise McCurtain said he will file a lawsuit against the Wildlife Services division if the agency does not pay unspecified damages for the death of the McCurtains' 7-year-old dog, Maggie. Attorney Daniel Stotter of Eugene said he'll file a tort claim notice Friday.

The director of the Wildlife Services office in Portland, David Williams, said when people and wildlife cross paths in urban areas, it's especially complicated. "We assess each situation with a focus on being as selective as possible for the species. We choose the tools very carefully to avoid unintended harm."

The dog died when its head was caught in a trap set at the edge of a pond in the McCurtains' residential neighborhood. The

Cedar Lake Neighborhood Association

, of which the McCurtains are members, paid Wildlife Services to kill nutria -- large, non-native rodents that frequent wetlands and can damage trees and bushes. The pond is part of the association's common area. Nutria had damaged the banks of the pond, and worse problems ahead were a concern, Williams says.

The McCurtains say the baited trap was set at the base of a trail leading to the pond's edge, 47 feet from their backyard fence. The couple said their children and others from the neighborhood frequently play along the shallow pond or tramp through the grass and bushes to retrieve soccer balls, to fish or catch frogs.

The Conibear trap is at the heart of the dispute. Wildlife Services' standards stipulate that the size of trap that was used should not be placed on land, attorney Stotter said. But the agency says it used a size of trap that is allowed on land.

An informational group, the I

Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management

, says large Conibear traps are dangerous and should be handled with extreme caution. "These traps should not be set in areas frequented by children, pets, or desirable wildlife species," the center's website advises. The center is affiliated with four universities: Cornell, Clemson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Utah State.

In the Gresham case, the only sign posted in the area was a small placard that identified the trap as government property and warned against tampering with it, the McCurtains said. Williams said 8 1/2-by-11-inch signs were around the pond, the standard procedure.

The homeowners' association emailed the McCurtains and other members in August about the trapping. The McCurtains said they assumed caged traps would be used and thought nothing of it when they let their dog outside on Aug. 27.

A neighbor told them a dog was caught in a trap, and Doug McCurtain discovered their dog Maggie near death at the edge of the pond, her head pinned between steel bars. He and others struggled to free her, but she could not be saved.

Their cause has been taken up by a Eugene advocacy group,

[Predator Defense](#)

, which opposes Wildlife Services' policy of killing problem animals. Executive Director Brooks Fahy said Maggie's death is a particularly egregious example of the agency's mistakes.

"They broke almost every rule that there was," he said.

Predator Defense made a video about the dog's death to draw attention to the case. Attorney Stotter said any settlement should include steps to improve Wildlife Services' practices.

After the dog's death, Wildlife Services removed the traps and signs, which had been vandalized.

"In the past three years, this is the only dog hurt," he said. "We offer our regrets for the take of the McCurtains' dog."

The McCurtains recently brought home a golden retriever puppy, Spencer.

[-- Eric Mortenson](#)

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