

Ground Squirrels Exterminated under City Manager's Orders

By Olin Ericksen
Staff Writer

January 13 -- In the end, not even a county supervisor could halt what may be the last round of killing Santa Monica ground squirrels in Palisades Park.

Under direct orders from the newly hired City manager Lamont Ewell -- and over the objections of animal advocacy groups, a local council member and County Supervisor Zev Yaroslovsky -- City staff gassed hundreds of squirrel burrows in the seaside park with a lethal dose of aluminum phosphide between Monday and Friday of last week.

Declining to be interviewed about the matter, Ewell issued a four page statement about the decision he made personally barely a month after assuming the top spot at City Hall.

"As a person who loves animals, my goal is to avoid ever having to reduce the populations of squirrels in this manner again," Ewell said.

In the statement, Ewell cited health concerns and "significant" exposure to "liability claims" if the City did not carry out a year-old compliance order issued by the Los Angeles County Health Department to immediately reduce the ground squirrel population.

Local animal right's groups said the City may have acted too quickly, however, as negotiations seemed underway between County Health officials and those who wanted to postpone the killing, including Supervisor Zev Yaroslovsky and Santa Monica City Council member Kevin McKeown.

"Instead of waiting for the facts to come in, (Santa Monica officials) squeezed the trigger," said Travis Longcore, an assistant professor at the USC Center for Sustainable Cities and science director for the Urban Wildlands group, a Los Angeles conservation organization.

"The city just went ahead with the killing, even though Zev

(Yaroslovsky) and Kevin McKeown were in talks" with County Health officials, Longcore said.

Emails obtained by *The Lookout* -- dated the same days that extermination was underway -- show correspondence between McKeown and Supervisor Yaroslovsky asking County Health Director Jonathan Fielding to give them more time to explore alternatives to killing the squirrels.

"Jonathan: Can you please follow this up with Councilmember McKeown?" asked the supervisor. "This is a serious problem, and I've heard from others around West Los Angeles about this as well.

"If he has an alternative idea of how to deal with the squirrels," the County supervisor wrote, "I think we owe it to him and the City of Santa Monica to give it serious consideration. Please keep me informed."

Another email from McKeown to the City Manager dated February 7 at around 11:30 am -- one day into the gassing -- shows that the council member was actively lobbying County Health to stave off the extermination, and seemed to show he thought he was making progress.

"My personal appeal has resulted in what I feel was a productive phone call," McKeown wrote. "I have just spoken directly with Dr. Jonathan Fielding of L.A. County Health Services.

"Dr. Fielding is willing to wait several days to let his staff review further data, should we or advocates have any, suggesting that a significant reduction in existing population can be effected by means other than a kill," the email said.

The alternative under discussion is the same alternative that Santa Monica officials said they will move forward with from this point forward: using contraceptives and educational programs to lower the population without a mass killing.

"Dr. Fielding met with his staff on this issue last night," McKeown wrote. "They appear to agree that an educational feeding and contraceptive program as proposed for Palisades Park can keep a squirrel population stable, but they are unsure that it can actively reduce an existing population in a reasonable amount of time.

"According to Dr. Fielding, the information on population

control which he has seen involves prairie dogs, not ground squirrels," the email said. "His concern is that a population decrease happen in the relatively short term, and he thinks a contraceptive program might take years to significantly reduce existing population. However, he has instructed his people to go back and look again at our Santa Monica situation."

Gail Van Gordon, County Health supervisor of Vector Borne-disease surveillance, acknowledged that there were ongoing communications between health officials, the City and Yaroslovsky. However, she said, they received no order to give Santa Monica more time.

"If a county supervisor wanted us to hold back on enforcing the code, we would have, but no word come down to us," Van Gordon said last week. "Since last March, they have been in violation of the code."

Gordon said the population had increase over 300 percent in a four-month period last year, and that the County could not give any additional time -- even weeks -- to look at alternatives.

County Health did not seem convinced sterilization is an effective means of lowering the population quickly.

Longcore believes otherwise, and points to claims by the group, Animal Advocates, which will head up Santa Monica's new immunocontraceptives and education program that will begin a one-year trail run starting immediately.

"The Animal Advocates claim a 30 percent reduction in three months, and could have cut that population in half in a year," said Longcore. "Why go ahead and have a big kill when the population will just rebound to what the habitat will sustain?"

The City -- which has come under stiff criticism from such animal rights groups as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) for not exploring alternative to killing the squirrels in the past year -- will use a policy that urges visitors not to feed the squirrels and sterilizes the squirrels, City officials said.

"We are optimistic that the educational and contraceptive approaches will allow us to maintain the population and meet County requirements," said Ewell. "We are also serve as an alternative maintenance procedures for other communities to follow."

After holding off on the program and exploring options, such as trapping the rodents live, euthanizing them and feeding them to raptors in rehabilitation, the city moved quickly on the extermination after it received a summons January 16 by the County Health Department.

City officials decided to forgo the trapping because it could take weeks. Instead the City placed the aluminum phosphide in the burrows "to immediately reduce the numbers."

"This application," read Ewell's statement, "is highly effective at reducing the number of squirrels quickly and, more importantly, with minimal suffering."

"Based on this information, I directed staff to undertake a one-time suppression of the squirrels in the active burrows to satisfy the County and then move forward immediately with the implementation of Animal Advocate's program," Ewell said in the statement.

For Longcore and others, the decision seemed to be made in haste to rid the City of the gnawing problem of ground squirrels once and for all.

"To me, it's just senseless," he said.



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