

Narrative

Gary Strader Case

Mr. Strader began working for APHIS in April 2005 as a seasonal employee in Richfield, Utah. He was recruited by Kevin Lansford to go work for the APHIS office in Ely, Nevada later that year as a year-round employee. Mr. Lansford told him he would receive a yearly raise for the first seven years of his employment with the agency. Based on Mr. Lansford's promises, Mr. Strader sold his house and moved to Wells, Nevada, where he bought a new one.

Mr. Strader's job with APHIS was primarily to track and kill coyotes, although occasionally he was sent to kill other types of wildlife. Importantly, it is legal to kill coyotes by shooting them from a plane, but it is a felony to shoot other types of animals aerially that are considered to be game animals, such as mountain lions, deer, etc.

A couple of months into his employment with the Ely office, one of Mr. Strader's fellow APHIS employees, Jim Bueller, arranged to come to Wells and stay at Mr. Strader's house for a couple of days and hunt mountain lions in the surrounding area. Mr. Strader and Mr. Bueller drove together to Starr Valley, where they met another APHIS employee, Derrill Fry. Two other employees, Gilbert Temoke and Shane Husbey, flew a plane to track lions, and maintained radio contact with Mr. Strader, Mr. Fry, and Mr. Bueller on the ground. The men in the plane located a pair of tracks and followed them to a place called Smiley Ranch. Mr. Bueller, Mr. Fry, and Mr. Strader then set out on snowmobiles to continue tracking the lions. One of the machines broke down, however, so that all three could not continue towards the tracks. Mr. Fry decided that he should continue on with Mr. Bueller, because he had dogs with him.

Mr. Strader therefore walked out to the nearest road and called his wife to come get him, after which he continued working that day, checking traps. That evening, when Mr. Bueller returned to Mr. Strader's house, Mr. Bueller told him that they had killed two lions that day. Mr. Bueller said that they had not pelted the lions, only taken their heads.

In September 2007, Mr. Strader spent a day working with Mr. Temoke. While they worked, the conversation turned to hunting lions, and Mr. Strader mentioned the two that Mr. Bueller and Mr. Fry had killed the year before. Mr. Temoke laughed and told Mr. Strader that Mr. Bueller and Mr. Fry had not killed the lions; rather, he and Mr. Husbey had killed them from the plane. Mr. Husbey later admitted to Mr. Strader having killed the lions.

Some time later, Joe Bennett, the USDA Nevada Wildlife Services East District Supervisor, (who is a close personal friend of Mr. Bueller) spent two days working with Mr. Strader checking traps and calling coyotes. On the second day, Mr. Strader brought up the issue of the lions with him, in hopes that Mr. Bennett would discuss it with the men involved to make sure it did not happen again. Instead, Mr. Bennett got very angry with Mr. Strader and accused him of making up the story and trying to cause trouble. Prior to this conversation, Mr. Bennett had been very friendly to Mr. Strader. After this conversation, however, Mr. Bennett's attitude changed, and he often referred to Mr. Strader as a trouble-maker.

Mr. Strader later learned of three more lions that the aerial crew shot from the plane. Two of these lions were killed in March of 2006 in Clover Canyon, and the other one was killed in December of 2005 in Clover Valley west of the cemetery.

After it became clear that Mr. Bennett was not going to address the illegal lion killings, and that he was being retaliated against, Mr. Strader tried to draw attention to the issue through other means. He first went to Gary Littauer, Assistant Western Regional Director of USDA Wildlife Services, in December 2008. Mr. Littauer handed over the complaint to USDA Human Resources, which assigned Kevin Miller to the case.

Mr. Miller met with Mr. Strader in person. When Mr. Strader was giving Mr. Miller his statement, Mr. Miller interrupted him and asked him if he realized how serious his allegations were. Mr. Miller added that “if this is found to be true, Mark and Joe will both be replaced and Shane and Gilbert will both go to prison and Nevada Wild Life Services will lose their flying program.”

Mr. Miller took few notes regarding Mr. Strader’s complaint, and instead, asked Mr. Strader to send him a written statement. Mr. Miller stated he would be back in touch with Mr. Strader, and would come back to town in a couple of weeks to conduct more interviews. Mr. Strader never heard from Mr. Miller again.

Also in October of 2008, Mr. Strader contacted Jerry Smith with the Nevada Department of Wildlife about doing an investigation. Mr. Smith acknowledged that shooting mountain lions aerially is a felony. Mr. Smith ostensibly began an investigation, including taking into evidence the two lion skulls that Mr. Fry had turned in during 2006. In February 2009, Mr. Smith called Mr. Strader and informed him that his investigation was complete, and that they had no evidence of any illegal lion hunting. When Mr. Strader asked him about the skulls that he had as evidence, Mr. Smith replied that he had made a mistake and had the wrong skulls.

On February 6, 2009, after Mr. Smith told him his agency was not going to do anything, Mr. Strader filed a complaint with FBI agent Jason Benedetti. According to Mr. Benedetti, the FBI has turned over the investigation to the Inspector General Office in Sacramento, California and Mr. Strader has no information on the status of that investigation.

Prior to making complaints about illegal hunting, Mr. Strader had been repeatedly assured that his career with APHIS was secure. As recently as August 2008, Mark Jensen, Director of the Nevada Wildlife Services, told Mr. Strader that his job was safe, and that he would never have to worry about his job because “we always takes care of our own.”

In March 2009, however, Mr. Jensen informed him that he was going to be terminated due to a Reduction in Force on June 30, 2009. Mr. Strader asked Mr. Jensen if he would still have a job if he had not made the complaint to the FBI, and Mr. Jensen nodded his head affirmatively.

Mr. Jensen did not give Mr. Strader anything in writing regarding the termination. Then on March 16, 2009, Mr. Jensen told Mr. Strader that he was being terminated as of April 9, 2009, but he did not tell him the basis for his termination. Mr. Strader had secured legal counsel by then, who sent a letter to Mr. Jensen informing him that he could not terminate Mr. Strader without providing him with notice pursuant to the RIF policy. Neither Mr. Strader nor his counsel received any response to this letter.

Mr. Jensen contacted Mr. Strader and told him to meet him in Elko to return his equipment on April 9, 2009. On April 7, 2009, Mr. Strader was in the bed of his truck getting his

equipment ready to turn in, when Mr. Jensen called him on his cell phone, which was inside the cab of the truck. When Mr. Strader jumped off the bed of the truck to get to the phone, his foot caught on the truck bed and he fell face first onto the ground. He ended up cracking three teeth and tearing his rotator cuff.

Mr. Strader filed a Worker's Compensation claim based on this accident. Mr. Jensen has interfered with the claim by not sending in the paperwork he has been sent by Mr. Strader's doctors.

Mr. Jensen also delayed the processing of Mr. Strader's final pay, which he finally received on June 1, 2009, after numerous documented contacts with Mr. Jensen regarding the pay.