

Livestock discussion highlights nonlethal predator control

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Ranchers living in predator country can protect their livestock by changing the behavior of either the predators or their herds. Sometimes, it might take a little of both.

On Wednesday night at the Lindley Center in Bozeman, representatives of wildlife and livestock agencies and conservation groups discussed some emerging nonlethal practices that could help livestock producers minimize not just losses due to predators but possibly losses overall. The only ranchers in the audience were those who already support predator coexistence.

In southwestern Montana, ranchers must coexist with wolves, bears and mountain lions. In the past, federal and state dollars have supported only lethal management efforts.

The problem with using only lethal methods is they require endless funding and ranchers still end up with losses.

But this year, the Montana Livestock Board changed its emphasis, thanks to Democratic U.S. Sen. Jon Tester's efforts to get federal funding, said George Edwards, Livestock Board executive secretary. In September, the board received a \$170,000 grant, \$100,000 of which must support nonlethal predator management.

“Ranchers know or have good ideas of what they think might work. So we thought the way we could get more participation from these ranchers is to throw the tools of the toolbox onto the table and let them pick the tool out,” Edwards said. “Our board also recognizes the importance of keeping all the tools in the toolbox. That may include lethal removal.”

But the toolbox is filling with alternatives to lethal removal.

Fish, Wildlife & Parks wolf biologist Abbie Nelson specializes in nonlethal techniques to discourage wolves from coming near livestock.

Nelson said it helps to remove all potential food such as carcasses and bone piles that might attract wolves in the first place.

Automatic devices intended to scare wolves, such as fencing with flags, lights or triggered noise makers, can have limited effectiveness.

Range riders require more man-hours but are more effective and can produce other benefits such as training a herd to stay together, said Keystone Conservation field director Matt Barnes.

Barnes said keeping a herd together makes for better grazing and makes it easier to move herds between fields, which can improve range health. This is an active area of research in agriculture.

The extra cost of using riders can be made up by the fact that such short-term, high-intensity grazing allows ranchers to increase the number of animals in their herd without damaging the land.

Barnes said he worked at a Colorado ranch that was able to keep half again as many cattle on the land as neighbors who didn't move their herds.

When livestock stick together, there's less opportunity for wolves to attack.

"Isolated animals, even animals like elk and bison, are easy prey. All the nonlethal tools require that the animals be sufficiently together," Barnes said. "The best tools are the ones with brains: riders and dogs."

Edwards said he didn't think many ranchers would buy into moving herds regularly.

"I don't think you'll get any cooperation from ranchers if they have to do something every day," Edwards said.

And there lies the benefit of livestock protection dogs, said Michael Marlow of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Dogs can fill a number of roles, from fighting off predators to alerting humans of predator presence and problems with the herd itself.

Dogs are more popular with sheep producers, but APHIS Wildlife Research Center director Mark Tobin said they will also protect cattle.

Guard dogs such as Great Pyrenees became popular in the U.S. a few decades ago as a defense against coyotes. Wolves can present more of a challenge so APHIS has started researching the use of larger breeds.

"We want to make sure this tool is being used as effectively as possible if we're going to continue to promote it both within the agency and the producer community," said APHIS researcher Julie Young.

Marlow said APHIS also developed some recommendations for owners to better train their dogs after dog-human conflicts started to increase on public land near grazing allotments.

But humans were just as much a part of the problem, disturbing the dogs and sometimes taking them to shelters.

Helena dog breeder Peggy Duezabou said there's one thing to do if someone encounters a strange dog near a flock, pacing a fence line or watching from a vantage point.

"If you see dogs doing that, they're working. Leave them alone," Duezabou said.