

Managing Complexity on Working Landscapes Across the West:

Building Capacity to Reduce Human-Wildlife Conflict

Tracy Schohr, Grace Woodmansee, Laura Snell, Dan Macon, and David Lile; UC Cooperative Extension

Background & Goal

Ranchers are a primary source of information for other ranchers, and previous experience coping with complex challenges is a key driver of the adoption of adaptive management practices. Strong, collaborative networks create opportunities for formal and shared learning, and good leadership within these networks is critical.

Given the important role that peer-to-peer learning plays in adapting to natural resource related challenges, ranchers and UCCE advisors from Northeastern CA visited several ranchers in Idaho and Montana to learn more about how they have adapted their operations under increasingly complex, and compounding, challenges over the past two decades. One of these challenges is increasing apex predator pressure.

Here, we present information gained during small-group discussions and ranch tours, specifically about the impact of non-lethal tools and management strategies implemented to reduce livestock-predator interaction within these operations.



Land manager experience is an important aspect of developing applied solutions to complex land management challenges. The perspective shared by Rocky Mountain ranchers, in addition to the perspective of California ranchers, can help inform realistic and effective on-the-ground management solutions to predator related challenges.

Photo: Linda Owens with Madison Valley Ranchlands group providing a tour and background on community composting site.

Partnership Model: Madison Valley Ranchlands Group

The Madison Valley Ranchlands Group is a non-profit, boundary spanning organization dedicated to keeping the ranching way of life viable by protecting open space for productive agriculture, wildlife habitat, recreation and watershed management. This group brings together landowners, property associations, government agencies and conservation organizations to find solutions to natural resources related challenges for Madison Valley, MT. The group focuses on maintaining ranching traditions while managing change in the manner that offers a profitable future for livestock producers.

The group is active in federal politics to support the 4C's – Compensation, conflict prevention, control and collaboration. Locally, they have instituted a carcass pickup program and developed a community-based carcass compost site to reduce attractants.

"We're making a difference by taking predator attractants off the landscape – but can't say we are reducing conflict"

Complex Challenges: It Goes Beyond predators

The general sentiment from discussions with Idaho and Montana livestock producers is that ranchers are all in this together. Ranching in Western States is complex, and producers are faced with a myriad of complex challenges, including:

- Outside money was the top challenge mentioned by ranchers across the board. They referred to it as the "Yellowstone Effect," after the show, where new residents moved in with outside money and views.
- Public Lands Grazing – "being a full partner with the government is daunting, having to ask permission for everything"
- Herder/Employees (H2A Program)
- Brucellosis from wildlife and cattle intermingling
- Rocky Mountain ranchers have challenges coping with federally-listed Grizzly Bears (which are often highly aggressive) that is similar to the challenges California ranchers face with state-listed wolves. "Our grizzlies are more similar to your wolves"

Predator related impacts (including the cost of non-lethal deterrents and indirect impacts) within Madison Valley were highly variable. Predators were not often mentioned as a top concern or challenge, but were often viewed as "the straw that breaks the camel's back" as ranchers have adapted their operations under increasingly complex, and compounding, challenges over the past two decades.

"We went through it all - all tools worked for a little while, but not long term"



"The key qualities that keep working families on the land are also attracting rapid, unplanned development. Unless we work together, the values we cherish will become little more than memories."

- MV Ranchlands Group



Rocky Mountain Rancher Perspectives

Cattle management on extensive rangeland:

- Prioritize good herd health and husbandry practices in general to reduce risk of livestock-predator conflict: ***"We're proactive about what we take to our allotment.... it's more about the health of the herd and not having stock that are too excitable"***

For example:

- Sound cows that are PAP tested - in addition to thriving in high-elevation, ranchers reported benefits of PAP testing related to stress tolerance.
- Early calving to take bigger calves to the mountains. "We don't take predator bait to the mountains."
- Not common to take yearlings/heifers to mountains.

Guard Dogs

- Guard dog and wolf interactions are extremely variable. Sometimes wolves want to play and befriend dogs and sometimes fiercely attack.
- Guard dogs are effective, until they have been attacked by a wolf and then are useless.
- Finding the right mix of dogs for a band of sheep is a challenge (e.g. number, personality, instincts/characteristics)
- Cattle producers are trying to use guard dogs too.
- Liability concerns associated with using guard dogs – conflict with recreationists, other dogs, etc.

Predator Adaptation

- Some say with hunting, wolves become more sneaky/nocturnal, but not necessarily seeing less predation on livestock.
- Ranchers we spoke with very rarely see wolves. However, they often see and experience their impacts.

Range Riding

- Viewed as MOST EFFECTIVE TOOL. ***Range riding "sure made a difference, but it's a 24/7 job"***
- ***KEY: must be a highly skilled rider that's familiar with the area and committed to nighttime riding.***
- Range riders may be passing the wolf impact to neighbors. Thus, harassing wolves so they go somewhere else.

Carcass Removal and Composting

- Hard to say whether carcass removal and composting has reduced conflicts. For some, it's a proactive tool to reduce predator attractants. For others, wolves have never visited bone piles at their ranch.

Compensation

- Can't confirm most losses – scavenged and/or never found on extensive range.
- Ranchers emphasized the importance of an easily accessible compensation program (i.e., not too much paperwork, prompt depredation investigations), which is especially important when a producer experiences high losses. For example, one ranch lost 50+ rams a month before turnout.

Wildlife

- As apex predators have increased, so has wildlife pressure in agricultural valleys (e.g. crop depredation, increased disease spread - Brucellosis).
- Observations of wolves displacing coyotes and mountain lions.