

Creating More Problems Than It Solved

One rancher's opinion about why the wolf reintroduction was a failure—not in the sense of bringing the wolf back—but because it created more problems than it solved for landowners, sportsmen, and the wolf.

By Fred Hirschy
B&C Regular Member

I am a fourth-generation rancher and live on the same ranch in the Big Hole Valley that my ancestors homesteaded in 1894, when there were more people living here on small homesteads than live here now. This breathtaking mountain valley, approximately 15 miles wide and 50 miles long, sits on the east side of the Continental Divide in southwest Montana. At an elevation of 6,200 feet, it is famous for good grass for livestock and wildlife, a bumper crop of mosquitoes, and “nine months of winter.”

When my ancestors first moved to this valley, there were no pronghorn or elk and few moose or deer, unlike the managed populations we have today. The predators at that time were coyotes, wolves, bears, and a few mountain lions. Wolves always posed a problem, especially in the winter, because they needed something to eat. They usually didn't live in the valley in the spring, summer, and fall, because there wasn't enough wildlife to sustain hungry packs. Consequently, during the winter, wolves would come through the ranches and kill many of the livestock since that was all there was to eat.

Most true ranchers are conservationists, and we hate to see anything get abused—our range, livestock, and wildlife—including wolves. We hate to see animals, domestic or wild, go hungry. The people who supported the wolf reintroduction in 1995 and 1996 didn't think about the fact that there was still nothing for them to eat in our valley during the winter when elk and pronghorn migrate out. Some wolves move with the elk but the rest stay in the valley and only have cattle and very few moose to feed on. Prior to the reintroduction the valley held a healthy moose population, which today has been trimmed back dramatically by wolves.

It appears that no one thought of the wolf's standpoint—they were getting along fine in Canada. Then they were trapped and transported to a new place here in Montana. In fact, one of the most inhumane things I've witnessed was watching a helicopter chase down a wolf for miles in the snow to dart it. I'm not blaming the people who did it; they were just doing their job. Ranchers often get behind the underdog, and on that day I was rooting for the wolf. But it is also inhumane to see wolves attack and tear the guts out of wildlife or livestock, especially when food does not seem to be the motivation. Contrary to what the so-called experts say, I have witnessed wolves attacking just to kill then leaving the prey to waste.

Wolves cause problems during the summer because they change the movement of wildlife and livestock. Elk, deer, and pronghorns used to come onto private lands only when the grass got dry or they were short of food. Now, wolves have pushed them to spend more time on private lands where they feel safer.

A consistent problem is not so much the wolves as it is dealing with the bureaucratic process and government personnel. When a problem arises, it takes a considerable

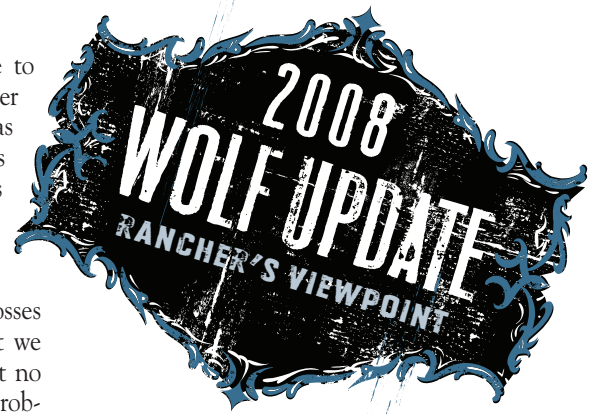
amount of time in making the necessary contracts and filling out the paperwork, not to mention the costs to taxpayers. We are almost to the point where we would rather put up with the wolves than the red tape that comes along with them. Dealing with the “Wolf Rules” also creates a moral dilemma for ranchers. It can make a lawbreaker out of the most law-abiding rancher, who is torn between taking care of a wolf problem to protect his stock and wildlife, or do what the government wants us to do, which, most of the time is look the other way.

The Defenders of Wildlife Fund gets a lot of positive media coverage about supposedly reimbursing landowners for livestock losses due to wolves. My family has never put in for reimbursement on any incurred losses to wolves and most of the other ranchers we know have chosen not to as well. Aside from the time it takes to get a livestock kill confirmed as a wolf kill; it is on the ranchers to then contact the Defenders of Wildlife or the State Livestock Loss Reduction Program. A better idea would be for those program managers to get the list of confirmed livestock kills from the feds and then contact those landowners about reimbursement. Other related, but less quantitative issues for ranchers include animal weight maintenance and riparian and range health. How can the government account for these—the biggest costs

to ranchers—weight gain and damage to riparian and pasture areas? Wolves alter livestock and wildlife movements, as these animals tend to bunch along creeks for safety and self-preservation. This is even more costly to ranchers than the death loss. Even when ranchers do lose livestock, most of the time the animals are consumed or we don't discover the losses until we get the cattle in and find out we are short. We have no recourse and get no reimbursement, because one of the problems with the system is that ranchers have to prove the loss is due to a wolf kill.

One of the reasons the Big Hole Valley is still the way it is, with no subdivisions and big, wide-open spaces, and we can participate in sportsmen's access programs is because we care for the land and are trying to keep it that way by not selling our ranches. Whenever we have to deal with the Endangered Species Act and more government regulations, I worry that it's another reason for the ranchers to sell out. If we did not have to deal with these issues, the valley would have a better chance of surviving as the treasure that it is.

Overall, I wouldn't have minded if the people who supported the wolf reintroduction would have spent their own money to reintroduce and control the wolf populations and mitigate the losses to farmers and ranchers. But it seems so counter-productive



to me when our taxpayer dollars are spent to correct the problems caused by the animal's return.

Before the official reintroduction of wolves, the ranchers in the Big Hole Valley would see a lone wolf now and then and weren't overly concerned. The small number of wolves that lived and migrated through the valley did not cause a noticeable problem to livestock or game. The problems started when the federal government forced a higher frequency of interaction between humans and wolves by reintroducing more of those predators than the landscape here was used to carrying. In my opinion, the reintroduction was a failure—certainly not in the sense of bringing the wolf back, but because it created more problems than it solved for landowners, sportsmen and the wolf. ■

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