

Coping with wolves in Wisconsin: Part 2

Feb 16, 2016 By Earl Stahl, Ph.D.

When wolves were reintroduced to the upper Midwest, it set up conflict in both cattle pastures and courtrooms. Part 2 of our analysis of how that has played out in Wisconsin defines the problem and looks at whether or not non-lethal control methods are effective.



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Last week, Stahl described the situation in Wisconsin regarding the interaction between reintroduced wolves and cattle producers. In part 2 of Stahl's article, he further defines the problem and looks at whether or not non-lethal control methods are effective. [Click here to read part 1.](#)

Problem wolves

When wolves in the Midwest were delisted, USDA Wildlife Services had the authority to remove [problem wolves](#). When wolves were placed under federal protection in 1974, this resulted, beginning in 1977, with a 15% annual increase in wolf numbers in Wisconsin, according to data supplied by Michigan DNR.

In 2014, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) estimated that there were 4,400 wolves in the upper Midwest, well above population goals. While hunting and trapping seasons in Wisconsin resulted in fewer wolf conflicts, returning wolves to endangered status has hamstrung everyone involved in Wisconsin's efforts to control wolf populations.

David Ruid, USDA assistant district supervisor and certified wildlife biologist, is involved in wolf management for the northern half of Wisconsin. The WDNR and the USDA cooperatively operate a wolf depredation program which has a 24/7 hotline that is closely monitored. Whenever a livestock owner reports [wolf depredation](#), staff are sent to the farm or ranch to document the report.

Ruid states that it is important for staff to respond as quickly as possible in order to examine the depredation site before it is damaged by livestock or weather conditions. In many cases, staff members are able to respond the same day that the report is received. When it has been determined that livestock depredation was caused by wolves, the livestock owner is compensated full market value. Recently, Minnesota exhausted its compensation fund for livestock losses and received funds from USFWS to continue its compensation program.

Ruid agrees that wolf depredation is minimal compared with other impacts that wolves have on [cattle husbandry](#) and herd management. The impact that wolves may have on some farms beyond depredations can be more detrimental to herd management than the depredation event. Weight loss brought on by predator-caused stress results in financial losses to cattle producers that exceed predation losses.

Further, the time and expense for cattle producers who attempt to minimize predator effects is an additional minus on their bottom lines. While Wisconsin is noted as a dairy state, Ruid says that depredation on dairy farms is much less frequent than on beef cattle farms and ranches because the majority of dairy cattle are not pastured. However, there are a few instances where wolves have entered farm buildings to depredate calves.

Non-lethal control

Regarding wolf depredation in Wisconsin, Ruid notes that less than 20% of the wolf packs in the state are involved in livestock depredation. Preventing those packs from preying on livestock is a challenge. Non-lethal methods have been employed by the WDNR and the USDA Wildlife Services, but those methods have inherent limitations.

For example, Ruid and his staff have fitted trapped wolves with radio collars that trigger loud noises and lights from a Radio Activated Guard (RAG box) when the collared wolf approaches the farm. However, these devices have limitations. Wolves hunt in packs and likely only the collared animal will be negatively affected. Also, dense vegetation, which is common in the Western Great Lakes Region, limits the effective range of the device.

Another non-lethal method has been the installation of fladry, which is an electrified poly wire supporting red flags around pasture perimeters. The hot wire is attached to separate fence posts inside of the existing pasture fence. The red plastic strips are intended to ward off wolves and the hot wire prevents cows from damaging the red strips (the hot wire is installed too high to affect wolves).

Fladry is a line of rope mounted along the top of a fence, from which are suspended strips of fabric or colored flags that will flap in a breeze, intended to deter wolves from crossing the fence

line. It is effective temporarily, as the novelty may soon wear off, usually between three to five months, and may be used to protect livestock in small pastures from wolves (source: Musiania, et al, Wolf Depredation Trends and the Use of Fladry Barriers to Protect Livestock in Western North America, *Conservation Biology*, 17, 2003).

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife states, “It (fladry) may be applied to certain range situations but is best used as mobile protection on a short term basis ... In general, fladry is not intended for use over long periods of time in the same location because wolves may become habituated and thereby reduce effectiveness.” One of the limitations that Ruid notes is that calves are able to get under the hot wire but cows cannot, occasionally resulting in calf depredation by wolves.

The territory of a Wisconsin wolf pack is roughly 40 square miles and farms in the state may average between 200 and 300 acres which further complicates non-lethal efforts. Ruid and his staff may install non-lethal techniques on a farm that has experienced wolf problems, only to have the pack show up at another farm miles away. Ruid also notes that the lack of long-term research on the effectiveness of non-lethal efforts makes it difficult to determine the success or failure of those efforts.

Under the current status of federal protection, the WDNR and the USDA cannot use lethal removal of problem wolves, which makes resolving wolf depredations more difficult. Currently, Ruid and his staff are limited to non-lethal abatement methods. Trapping problem wolves and relocating them is not a practical strategy and is not utilized in USFWS’s Western Great Lakes District Population Segment (WGLDPS). Based on the 1992 Federal Recovery Plan for this region, wolves have surpassed their required recovery population levels.

At the time this is being written, legislation is pending in Congress to allow Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wyoming to manage wolf populations without interference from the courts. This legislation was introduced by Wisconsin Representative Reid Ribble (R) and is said to have bipartisan support. Although passage of the legislation appears promising, it did not happen in time for Wisconsin to hold a wolf hunting and trapping season in 2015-16.

In an article in the Feb. 21, 2015 edition of the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the president of the Carlton County chapter of the Minnesota Farmers Union, Mark Thell, says, “We’re stuck in limbo. You can’t even protect your own animals. It’s not a good situation.” It goes without saying that Wisconsin cattle producers and farmers agree.

Earl Stahl and his wife live in Wisconsin’s Fox Valley region, which covers an area from Oshkosh to Green Bay. Earl holds a Ph.D. from The Ohio State University and retired as a professor from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh in 1994. He is an avid hunter and angler, pursuing those interests in the lower 48 states as well as Alaska and Canada. His interest in wolves and their impact on livestock, big game, and people began with his appointment to Wolf Education International, an organization devoted to telling the truth about wolves. He has authored articles in Range magazine, Western Ag Reporter and Tri-State Livestock News.

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