

# Do non-lethal control methods reduce wolf depredation? Ranchers say no

For ranchers in wolf country, the answer is clear—non-lethal control methods don't work.



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Some think wolves are majestic icons of the West. Others consider them superb predators that threaten livestock and wildlife populations. And that makes for heated debate over how, or even if, humans, other animals and wolves can coexist. For western ranchers, the debate is simple: as long as there are wolves, [livestock will suffer](#) cruel and unnecessary deaths.

Just ask Casey Anderson. His Ox Bow Ranch at Bear, Idaho, is home to more than 1,000 cattle that run in rugged country that is a mix of private and public land. Anderson and his cattle share that land with wolves.

During a recent [wolf depredation](#) workshop in Cambridge, Idaho, sponsored by USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and Idaho Office of Species Conservation, Anderson pointed out that it's a matter of scale whether or not non-lethal control methods can hinder wolf depredation. There are some non-lethal strategies that may work on a small ranch if you can be out with your animals regularly, or can put up special fencing or electrified flagging to keep wolves out of pastures, he says.

“It boils down to how many wolves you have—whether just one or two passing through occasionally or a resident pack feeding their pups. When we had so many wolves here in 2009 and for several years after, there was nothing we could do to stop depredation,” he says.

“If you only have a few wolves and they don’t have pups, they may not be as much problem,” Anderson says. “But if you have a pack of 12, like we had—which was one of three different packs working on us those years—and that pack has six pups, this makes 18 wolves. All the adults are hunting for the pack and raising those pups. This can be devastating if they are killing livestock,” he explains.

“Some of the things recommended for [non-lethal strategies](#) help, such as removing dead carcasses, but the flagging and other methods won’t work on a ranch our size. They talk about re-wilding our cattle, and that happens anyway; that’s what cattle do in response to wolves,” says Anderson.

When wolves are in the area, cattle nervously group together, are on high alert and don’t spend as much time grazing—they are very protective of their calves. This makes management harder, and the cattle much more difficult to handle. It negates low-stress handling goals and beef quality assurance and all the things ranchers work hard to implement for better animal husbandry and better care of their livestock, he says.

Many of the people suggesting non-lethal methods as a deterrent feel that ranchers can coexist with these predators. “People have to realize there’s a [trigger point](#) at which we can’t coexist. The trigger point is the number of wolves you have, and the behavior of the wolves,” Anderson says.

One of the things that contributed to less depredation on Anderson’s cowherd this year is that they no longer have a certain female wolf. “She was the cause of our first depredation in 2008. She was collared at Challis, Idaho, then moved across the state and decided she liked it here.”

Anderson and the government agency did not remove her because she was collared and could help the trappers know where her pack was. “There are so few wolves now that are collared, everyone felt we needed her. But she was notorious for bringing her pups into our cattle and teaching them how to kill calves,” he says. “That female was finally removed two winters ago. Being collared, she did help us keep track of where the pack was, but we didn’t understand that her pack was learning to kill cattle.

“We are [more vulnerable](#) than some ranches because we calve in May and June, the same time as the deer and elk. That pack was eating our calves along with the elk calves,” says Anderson. This contradicts the “logic” of certain recent “scientific” papers that suggest livestock will be safer calving at this time because wolves will have plenty of prey and leave the cattle alone.

Valerius Geist, a professor at Calgary, Alberta and wolf expert, says a wolf learns by observation and experience. “When a wolf gets used to killing livestock or coming close to houses—or any behavior that is unacceptable—he told us that that wolf and that pack has to be removed. They will just keep doing this, and teach their pups to do it,” says Anderson.

“People don’t give wolves credit for being smart and adaptable. Wolves learn from their observations. They are watching and learning, constantly. Geist told about two wolves that were seen at the edge of a meadow. After a few days, they came out into the meadow and got closer to

people. Then, as the ranchers were riding by on their horses, the wolves came out when they were riding. This progression kept going and before long those wolves were on their porch, killing dogs and cats. It's a learned behavior and the wolves are always pushing their boundaries. His point was that humans have to keep the boundaries."

"In Idaho, if we had stuck with the 15 packs and 150 wolves for the state (the original goal when wolves were introduced in 1995), we would not be having this conversation about how to control them. We'd be keeping wolves to those numbers, [pushing them back](#) into the wilderness areas, and there wouldn't be as much problem," Anderson says. He blames the situation on people who want more wolves and want them everywhere. "But we can't live with them everywhere."

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