

Living with Wolves: The cost to ranchers

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There were 367 confirmed wolf kills in Montana in 2009, and there are at least six so far this year. But for one long-time cattleman near Drummond, the cost of wolves runs much deeper than an occasional cow carcass.

It's auction day on Ron Skinner's ranch in Hall, where fellow ranchers bought 174 of his cattle, but it's the money that got away that really hurts. "We had severe weight loss in calves that came out of wolf areas compared to calves where there are no wolves" Skinner explained.

Those heifer calves were an average of 97 pounds lighter than others and with the going rate of beef at 93 cents a pound, that's a \$90.21 loss per animal. Then multiply that times 150 of them and that's a total loss of \$13,531.

A more visually disturbing loss is wolf depredation according to Skinner. "I'm a purebred breeder. This was an embryo transplant heifer and she was worth a lot of money and we don't know what she would produce in her lifetime, but the compensation wasn't even close."

We came across a still-warm elk carcass on a nearby mountain, tangible evidence of perhaps Skinner's greatest problem. "The environmental damages and range management damages are worst than depredation" the rancher said.

Skinner leases this land to graze his cattle. But, he's not getting anywhere near his money's worth from it because wolves continually push the cattle off the grassy slopes, away from the feed, and back into over-grazed riparian areas below.

That forced him to buy 200 extra tons of hay this year, and Skinner says there are many other wolf-related effects on ranchers. There's stress, which can lead to lower pregnancy rates, young cattle that don't grade as high, extra manpower to monitor wolf activity, injury to livestock, damage to fences and danger to humans, like when wolves showed up in his corrals right next to his house driving the black bulls through the fence onto the highway at night.

"The first thing I did was get on the road with my flashers so somebody didn't get killed, and it will eventually happen" Skinner told us.

Despite the constant threat of wolves, Skinner carries on as a third generation Montana rancher with a wary eye on the future. "The real question is do you want ranchers to produce food for you? If we go through the economic pressures of wolves, some ranchers won't survive."

Wildlife officials killed off the 15-member Willow Creek wolf pack in 2008 after it continually preyed on sheep and cattle belonging to Hall ranchers. But, three new wolves returned this past summer, killing another calf and a heifer.