

GRAY WOLVES AND LIVESTOCK IN MONTANA: RECENT HISTORY OF DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

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The Montana gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) population grew from two wolves in 1979 to a minimum of 316 by late 2006. Resolving conflicts, both perceived and real, between wolves and livestock was a dominant social issue for the federal recovery program, and it remains so today. The USDI Fish and Wildlife Service and now Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks work with USDA-APHIS-Wildlife Services to reduce depredation risks and address wolf-related conflicts through a combination of non-lethal and lethal management tools. The number of wolf complaints investigated from 1987-2006 increased as the population increased and expanded its distribution into Montana after reintroduction into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995/96. Montana wolf packs routinely encountered livestock, though wolf depredation was a relatively rare cause of livestock death and difficult to predict or prevent. Cattle and sheep were killed most often from March to October although losses were confirmed each month. From 1987-2006, wolves killed 230 cattle, and 436 sheep. However, confirmed losses probably represent a fraction of actual wolf losses. Few other types of livestock classes were killed. Conflicts are addressed on a case-by-case basis, striving to connect the agency response to the damage in space and time and to decrease the potential for future losses. Lethal control is implemented incrementally after predation was verified, and 254 wolves were killed from 1987–2006. Only complete removal of either wolves or livestock eliminates the potential for wolf depredation. The continued presence of a viable wolf population requires that a wide variety of non-lethal and lethal tools be investigated and implemented. That combination will also be required to maintain local public tolerance of wolves where the two overlap and to foster broad public acceptance of techniques used to minimize conflicts. Resolving wolf-livestock conflicts at a local scale is but one component of a larger state wolf conservation and management program. Upon delisting, regulated public harvest will allow us to more proactively manage the population.