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Predator Control: History and Policies

Oregon State University Extension Service • Extension Circular 710-B

Farmers have attempted to control losses of livestock to predatory animals in the United States for over 300 years. In 1630 the first bounty system was established in Massachusetts in an effort to control marauding wolves. The policies for predator control and extent of control efforts have varied considerably since 1630.

During the rapid settlement of the United States (1630 to 1840) wolves, bears, and mountain lions were the chief predators preying primarily on cattle, sheep, and poultry. Control measures included deadfalls, set guns, steel traps, snares, and hunting with dogs. Many predators were shot while killing livestock. In those days individual ranchers had to do their own control work—primarily against the predator doing the damage. Predator control policy was, "the only good predator is a dead one."

As midwestern and western states were settled (1800-1900), farmers and ranchers came into contact with a new predator—the coyote. This period saw the development of larger livestock operations as the western rangelands were more suited to such operations than the eastern deciduous forest. As white hunters killed off the bison and increased the number of livestock on the range, predators exerted an increasing amount of pressure on livestock and poultry. Control measures were still practiced by the individual livestock grower, but now the arsenal included a new weapon—poison. Strychnine, obtained from the seeds of a tropical tree, was widely employed in the Midwest and West by 1860. The bounty system was initiated in this area, primarily for the control of coyotes at this time.

Wolves were still a source of loss to livestock in the West and played a part in Oregon statehood. In 1843 a meeting was held at Champoeg, Oregon, where a resolution was adopted to provide for protection against predatory animals by offering a bounty on predators: $5 for mountain lions, $3 for wolves, $2 for bears, and $1.50 for lynx. Predators still were considered to be vermin that caused economic loss and were to be destroyed.

Federal control program

By 1900 the situation had changed little, and livestock growers were beginning to request government assistance to control predators. At this time the Bureau of Biological Survey (BBS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture was providing information on trapping wolves.

With the coming of World War I, there was an increased demand for red meat for the armed forces. The western delegation in Congress asked for money and workers to reduce losses caused by predators on livestock. In 1915 the Congress appropriated $125,000 in Federal funds to the BBS for experiments and demonstrations for controlling . . . "wolves, prairie dogs, and other animals injurious to livestock," and to assist in organized predator control on national forests and other public land. The BBS used some of this money initially to hire trappers to kill predators. Whereas individual livestock producers previously had controlled predators in the immediate vicinity of their operations, now the Federal trappers expanded control efforts to include remote regions in an attempt to greatly reduce numbers of predators (population control). The bounty system remained in effect in most states.

By 1930, many biologists and conservationists were alarmed over what they considered to be excesses in predator control efforts expended by the BBS. Predators now were perceived by the public as having some positive values rather than being all bad. These concerns resulted in a shift in policy, from total control to prophylactic or preventive control of predators. This change restricted control efforts to areas adjacent to livestock operations and was designed to prevent losses of livestock by likely predators and to leave unmolested predators in remote areas where they presented less danger to livestock. Also, the control agency was renamed the Predator and Rodent Control (PARC) Branch of the new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and administration was shifted from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Interior.

Two additional poisons, sodium monofluoroacetate (1080) and sodium cyanide, became available for predator control work by 1946. Sodium monofluoroacetate was injected into carcasses, which coyotes then ate; sodium cyanide, in the so-called "coyote-getter" (now the M-44 device), was blown into coyotes' mouths when they pulled on scented set guns buried in the earth. These two poisons were used extensively to increase preventive control efforts. Sodium cyanide and 1080, when used properly, presented less hazard to nontarget wildlife than other poisons.

Trapper-extension programs were developed in some states after World War II. The state Extension services trained ranchers to exert their own predator control by trapping. Missouri and parts of South Dakota and Kansas reported good success with the program, but Wisconsin's attempt at this method met with little acceptance and was unsuccessful. The trapper-extension program requires landowners to perform control activities on their land. The large blocks of public grazing land in the West do not appear suited for predator control by stock ranchers. The long history of the Federal trapping and poisoning assistance program, restrictions on use of pesticides, and the multiple uses assigned to public lands favor the continuation of the Federal or county trapper system. Few control methods are now available to the rancher-trapper, and only Federal and county trappers are able to use poison (sodium cyanide in the M-44 device).

Changes in Federal program

In 1964 Congressman John D. Dingell of Michigan offered a bill to strip the PARC program of much of its money and staff, and to restrict its activities. This action and complaints from concerned citizens led Secretary of the Interior Udall to appoint a committee of biologists to examine the situation and report to him. The ensuing Leopold report was critical of some aspects of the Federal program, but it did state a need for predator control, and it supported the belief that 1080 bait stations, where properly used, were effective and of little danger to nontarget animals. The committee recommended that control be limited to the troublesome species, preferably to the troublesome *individuals,* and only to localities where substantial damage or danger existed.

Other recommended changes were: changes in PARC goals and operations; a greatly increased research program for animal damage control; and increased legal control over the use of 1080. Several of these recommendations were followed, including renaming the agency the Division of Wildlife Services of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. More complaints by concerned citizens and biologists indicated that the committee's recommendations were not being followed, and in 1971 Secretary of the Interior Morton appointed Dr. Stanley A. Cain to chair a second committee on predator control. The ensuing Cain report, published in 1972, recommended increased restrictions for the Division of Wildlife Services' predator control program. In February 1972 President Nixon's Executive Order banned the use of poisons in predator control operations on public land. In March of 1972, the Environmental Protection Agency prohibited interstate shipment of predator poisons—notably, sodium cyanide and sodium monofluoroacetate.

Since 1972, control of predators has concentrated on controlling the problem animal with methods used earlier in this century. Control efforts are still conducted by Division of Wildlife Service personnel called district field agents. The district field agents now respond to calls to destroy problem animals rather than attempt to exterminate or control population densities. In 1975 President Ford amended President Nixon's Executive Order to allow several states, including Oregon, to use sodium cyanide in the M-44 device to poison coyotes. The use of this device is restricted to Federal district field agents and county trappers who have been certified for its use. Other means of control are traps, snares, and aerial gunning. Aerial gunning, first used in the 20's and 30's, assumed a large proportion of the control efforts expended against coyotes after the use of poisons was greatly curtailed.

Today the government's role in predator control is aimed toward controlling livestock predators that individual farmers and ranchers cannot adequately control. Governmental control of predators encourages farmers and ranchers to raise substantial numbers of animals under range conditions. Use of rangelands for animal husbandry permits low production costs of livestock. Less hay and grain are used to fatten range animals for the market, and the consumer is able to purchase meat at a relatively low cost. The partnership between government and the livestock industry has tangible benefits to the livestock consumer and the producer. Future predator control programs need to be more effective in removing problem animals, helping producers develop better husbandry practices, and insuring that the environment and livestock receive adequate protection.

Predator control in Oregon

The principal predator in Oregon now is the coyote, with the domestic dog a close second, particularly in the Willamette Valley. Bears, mountain lions, bobcats, eagles, and ravens occasionally cause losses, but these losses are small compared to those caused by coyotes and dogs. Domestic sheep, particularly lambs, are the primary livestock animals killed by coyotes and dogs. Occasionally the coyote kills calves and poultry.

In Oregon the administration of a predator control program began in 1933 with a cooperative agreement between the Fish and Wildlife Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Oregon Department of Agriculture. The cooperative agreement established a program of predatory animal control administered and enforced by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The agreement was revised in 1951 and in 1957, when the Oregon State Game Commission (now the Department of Fish and Wildlife) and the Oregon State University Extension Service were included as cooperators. The present agreement calls for predator control to be conducted by the district field agents upon request from livestock growers. Funds come from the Fish and Wildlife Service, Oregon Department of Agriculture, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and counties involved in the program. Currently there are 31 district field agents working in the cooperating counties in Oregon. Four counties have their own programs and trappers. Four counties pay a bounty on the coyote. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the OSU Extension Service function as advisory bodies for the predator control program. Representatives on the predator advisory committee confer annually on the extent, types, and area of the predator control program.

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October 1976

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