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WILDLIFE SERVICES—MONTANA

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USDA Resolves Wildlife Conflicts in Montana

Every day, Montana's residents, industries, organizations, and agencies call on Wildlife Services (WS) for expertise in protecting agriculture, property, natural resources, and human health and safety from damage or threats posed by wildlife. Managed by professional wildlife biologists, WS responds with effective, selective, and humane strategies to resolve wildlife conflicts.

Although Montana has the lowest population of any State in the Nation, its almost 60 million acres of farm and ranch land are surpassed by only one other State. Agriculture, particularly sheep and cattle production, is vital to the State's economy. Montana's diverse and abundant wildlife populations are also an important resource. The WS program in Montana focuses most of its efforts on managing the interface between livestock and wildlife. The recovery of two threatened and endangered species, the grizzly bear and the Rocky Mountain gray wolf, both predators of livestock, add a significant measure of complexity to WS' job. WS cooperates with the Montana Department of Livestock, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, as well as various livestock organizations to protect livestock from a variety of large predators. At the same time, WS cooperates with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in aiding the recovery of some threatened or endangered wildlife predators.

Top 5 Major Assistance Activities:

- Protecting sheep, cattle, goats, and other livestock from predation
- Protecting agricultural crops from damage caused by birds and small mammals
- Protecting Federal threatened and endangered species and other wildlife resources
- Protecting aquaculture from depredating birds
- Protecting personal property from waterfowl damage

Top 5 WS Research Projects of Interest to Montana:

- Managing coyote predation through reproductive intervention strategies
- Managing predators to protect livestock and wildlife
- Focusing on adult territorial coyotes to manage sheep depredation
- Developing chemistry based tools for wildlife damage management
- Improving assessment, sampling, and economic methods for wildlife damage

Applying Science & Expertise to Wildlife Challenges

WS offers information, advice, equipment, and materials that enable many people to resolve wildlife conflicts on their own. Often, this *technical assistance* can be provided over the phone. WS also provides on-site expertise, or *direct assistance,* to manage complex wildlife problems that cannot be safely resolved by others. To support this effort, WS conducts *scientific research* across the Nation to develop answers to new problems posed by wildlife and to ensure the program benefits from the latest science and technology.

While WS conducts a wide range of operational and research activities, a few in-depth examples are provided to highlight the variety of work WS is doing in Montana.

Protecting Livestock from Predators—In 2001, predators caused an estimated $.9 million in losses to Montana's sheep industry. Cattle losses to predators, although not reported annually, have increased significantly over the last 6 years as well. Because predators have a significant impact on the livestock industry, Montana livestock producers contribute funding to support WS' livestock protection efforts. Sheep producers in 49 counties and cattle producers in 12 counties provide additional funds for livestock protection.

WS is recognized by the livestock industry and State agencies as the lead in managing predator damage to livestock and other personal property. These predators include coyotes, mountain lions, bears, and wolves. The Montana Department of Livestock has given WS full authority to administer the Department's aerial operations as a tool to protect livestock.

In addition to the direct assistance WS employees provide to Montana farmers and ranchers, WS' National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) conducts an extensive program of research and methods development to reduce and prevent predation by wildlife on sheep and cattle. Studies are underway to develop more effective, less injurious coyote capture systems, sound-activated conditioning collars for wolves, and improved electronic frightening devices. Also, coyote territorial behavior and population modeling studies are underway to help develop reproduction suppression strategies for high predation-rate areas.

Protecting Natural Resources—The number of mule deer has been declining for several years in many western States including Montana. One reason for this decline may be predation on mule deer fawns. WS is assisting the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in reducing coyote populations in specific deer management districts where the number of deer are below desired levels. To meet objectives identified by the Department, WS uses aerial operations to protect mule deer and antelope fawns.

Protecting Air Travelers—The WS program is recognized by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for its expertise in reducing wildlife hazards to the aviation industry. WS has provided both technical and direct assistance to airports throughout Montana to identify and reduce potential safety hazards to the flying public and to the airlines.

NWRC also conducts research from its Sandusky, OH, Field Station to reduce wildlife hazards to aircraft and reduce risks to the public. Studies are underway at several large airports where scientists evaluate habitat management practices and wildlife dispersal techniques. NWRC also maintains the National Wildlife Strike Database used by the FAA and airports to monitor trends and wildlife species of greatest concern to aviation. Any and all research findings that prove to be applicable in reducing risks at Montana's airports will be considered as additional tools to prevent wildlife collisions with aircraft.

Looking to the Future

With the successful reintroduction and recovery of Rocky Mountain gray wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains, Montana WS anticipates the growing demand for its expertise in handling livestock predation issues related to the wolf. The livestock industry and State agencies are also expecting WS to provide this service. WS, however, may be somewhat limited in its resources to manage this damage. The presence of threatened and endangered species in an area places greater restrictions on the types of methods that can be used to manage predation by bears, coyotes, lions, and other wildlife. Many of the less expensive and most effective methods used to manage livestock predation are not permitted. This situation will create significant challenges for both livestock producers and WS managers in the future.

Montana Wildlife Services Funding

In addition to receiving federally allocated funds, WS also receives money from cooperators; such as producers; private individuals; businesses; and other Federal, State, and local government agencies who have a vested interest in the program. In most cases, these cooperators need help to resolve wildlife damage problems or they play a role in wildlife damage management.