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## Addressing the Root of the Coexistence Challenge

### Working Circle Approach

Why is it that nearly three decades since the reintroduction of wolves into the Greater Yellowstone Area, we have yet to create a lasting environment for wolves, livestock, and people to successfully share the landscape? What are we missing as we struggle to resolve the decades-old coexistence challenge? This question of WHY has been one of the driving forces behind Working Circle's efforts.

Based on our years of direct on-the-ground work partnering with ranchers across the West, this document highlights Working Circle's approach to answering the WHY and actively addressing the root of the coexistence challenge.

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The concept of coexistence with wolves is often simplified, but there is nothing simple about it. It is complicated and certainly not easy. Much has been discovered in the past ten years about "coexistence" and what that means. This discovery process has revealed the many dynamic layers required to move in a better and lasting direction for all stakeholders. This deeper understanding has led to newer, more advanced, and tremendously successful strategies. Strategies that redefine what coexistence looks like by changing the historical paradigm for how wolf-livestock conflict is approached.

As we explore this topic, we must consider that the landscape is not the same as it was 100, 50, or even 20 years ago, and ranchers and wildlife advocates must work within that reality. As the human population expands and the competition for the use of open space increases, livestock and predator co-occurrence is inevitable. Also increasing is wildlife's dependence on private ranch lands for habitat and connectivity between public open spaces. Ranching is an integral part of the wildlife conservation picture that needs to be recognized, valued, and embraced. The man-created boundary between wild and working lands has become unsustainable. The "and" in the middle is a battleground with no winners. It is time to widen the scope of the conversation. For long-term success, we must look forward instead of backward and focus on newer holistic approaches to wolf-livestock conflict mitigation that take into account the broader ranch and wildlife picture.



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## Prevent Loss to Livestock while Adding Value to the Ranch

Historically, coexistence between predators and livestock has required a continued output of resources in terms of time, energy (emotional, mental, and physical), and money. This outpouring of resources is not sustainable for ranchers, NGOs, or wildlife agencies. For coexistence to work long-term, the investment in conflict reduction practices must lead to an equal or greater return on investment leading to positive, long-term, sustainable outcomes.

We must look to practices with the dual objectives of reducing wolf-livestock conflict risk and advancing the overall ranch goals. Such practices increase ranch resiliency to withstand both the presence of predators and the many other challenges ranchers face today. The goal is to prevent the loss of livestock through practices that add value to the ranch.

Commonly used tools: fladry, traditional range riding (human presence), and even compensation programs, buy valuable time and have a significant role. However, we must expand beyond physical tools and predator scare tactics, which can function as effective, short-term band-aids but don't solve the underlying problems. We must look beyond the stop-gap strategies and invest more in advanced, comprehensive approaches that address the root of what is actually causing the conflict in the first place.

Traditional conflict reduction practices that drain resources, even energetically, inhibit ranchers' ability to engage in or proactively implement conflict reduction practices. When ranchers need to make changes only for wolves that can take valuable resources in time and energy away from the ranch, resentment towards wolves grows, reducing overall physical and social tolerance for this predator. This is the case even if the tools implemented have a successful result. Whereas, managing conflict risk through herd and operational practices that support the overall ranch goals not only brings benefits to ranchers and their operation, but encourages early buy-in and a proactive mindset. In addition, ranchers need to be able to manage conflict risk without long-term outside reliance or interference, as they do any other part of their business management plan.

**Key Point:** Actively deterring wolves over thousands of acres is daunting and often unrealistic. Investing time and energy towards long-term approaches that build the ranch to withstand wolves through practices that also lower conflict risk makes more sense.



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*Manage for what you want vs. managing for what you don't want or fear*  
~ Hilary Anderson, Crazy D Ranch, Montana

### **Managing Less for Wolves and More for the Ranch**

More often than not, when approaching coexistence, the focus is first on the wolves and the potential for conflict and then to look for ways to manage for wolves. Instead of concentrating on the conflict to determine coexistence strategies, we should first work to identify and understand the overall ranch vulnerabilities and needs. Ranchers face numerous challenges in the modern world. Focusing on conflict risk reduction strategies that strengthen the ranch business overall makes the potential for conflict less of an issue financially, emotionally, and energetically. By fixating solely on wolves and the conflict itself, we miss the opportunity to identify and implement more meaningful strategies that solve the root cause that makes the wolf-livestock conflict a big problem. In short, the actual problem must be identified before considering solutions.

*Focus on the process of discovery before implementing or selling the “solution.”*  
~ Hilary Anderson, Crazy D Ranch, Montana

It's easy to get stuck and remain tunnel-visioned on wolves, but instead, we need to think of the long game. We need to concentrate on conflict risk reduction approaches that do more than attempt to control wolves, but that fit into the needs of the overall ranch— strategies that focus more on what's within the rancher's power. Trying to control wild wolves is tough; managing sound business practices that consider conflict risk is 100% in the rancher's control.

The fact is, some ranches will experience livestock loss to wolves, and it is not likely that we will be able to prevent this entirely. However, we can strengthen the ranch with strategies and practices that have the co-benefits of reducing the risk of livestock loss *and* the impact if loss occurs. By supporting conflict risk reduction strategies that also help build the ranch, we help wolves, livestock, and people succeed **longterm**— a win-win scenario that benefits all stakeholders. In addition, we work to neutralize the polarizing debate that has hindered productive collaborations between wildlife NGOs and ranching communities.

This is not a one-size fits all scenario. What may make sense on one ranch may not make sense for another. To support the landowners and managers in developing a



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road map forward, the following questions must be asked: *What are your desired outcomes for the ranch? How does predator-livestock conflict affect your operational goals? What does a loss actually mean to the ranch? What other challenges does the ranch face? How does the potential for wolf-livestock conflict compare to that?*

It may mean that after evaluating the whole ranch's needs, strategically looking at and building conflict mitigation approaches into their business plan is a valuable use of resources. For another operation, putting resources into predator mitigation would not make sense because other challenges of greater concern take priority. The goal is to institute practices that will get a greater return on investment. Yet, others may find some conflict-reducing methods have additional value, even if they aren't worried about wolves.

*One understanding is worth a thousand techniques.*

~ Bill Dorrance

The presence of wolves can lead to emotionally charged decisions and investments that drain resources, potentially resulting in short-term solutions that don't solve the underlying problem. Thus, apart from emergency response measures, we must focus on the discovery process first, *why did the conflict occur?* Carefully evaluating the bigger picture of what's happening, including vulnerability factors in livestock and operations, before implementing strategies will save valuable time and resources.

In 2022, Working Circle partnered with Ranch Management Solutions' Ranching for Profit School. Some have asked, *"What does this have to do with coexistence?"* It has everything to do with serving both wolves and ranchers. If the rancher has the operational tools to support an economically viable and resilient business plan, wolves and other predators become less of an actual, possible, or perceived threat.

*Understanding the challenges ranchers face and the level of sophistication required to operate these complex biological systems in an economically and ecologically sustainable fashion will go a long way to ensure that working ranches and large predators who share those landscapes can endure and thrive long-term.*

~ Southern Oregon Rancher

Some people hesitate at this approach due to traditional mindsets. Some wolf advocates think, *"We are wolf conservationists; we are not in the business of supporting ranch operations."* But, if wolf recovery is to succeed, ranch families need



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to be able to work and live with wolves on shared lands successfully. In contrast, ranchers may hesitate at the thought of supporting wolf conservation. However, when ranchers fully embrace their valuable role as stewards of the land and wildlife, including predators, there are great opportunities for funding, public perception, and market support.

Another roadblock comes from resistance to new ideas or approaches. The strategies discussed in this document often fall outside the expertise or comfort zone of wolf advocates and wildlife agencies, and ranchers don't want wolf conservationists meddling in their business. It is much simpler to put up fladry or dig in our heels and claim nothing works rather than lower our barriers to moving forward and take the time to understand more complex and nuanced approaches. We must not be afraid to address the true breadth of factors influencing coexistence success. We need to push the envelope of our comfort zones to finally experience positive long-term outcomes.

*We cannot do our best when fighting against our worst.*  
~ Author Unknown

**Key Point:** The problem needs to be understood before you can consider solutions.

### **Understanding Vulnerability for Conflict Risk Mitigation**

An example of where we can add value while reducing conflict by managing less for wolves and more for what is in the rancher's control lies in the concept of vulnerability. By supporting the ranch goals and increasing resiliency, you reduce vulnerability to the operational impact of wolf-livestock conflict. Understanding cattle vulnerability creates the opportunity to explore and implement practices that reduce wolf-livestock conflict risk while adding value to the ranch. This allows us to focus on approaches that actually solve the root causes of the wolf-livestock conflict.

*If you are going to raise prey in predator country, you want to be sure your cattle are the least vulnerable on the landscape*  
~ Whit Hibbard, Stockmanship Journal

Prey's vulnerability highly influences wolf hunting success. As wolves circulate through their territory, they encounter and test prey under various conditions to gain information about the prey's susceptibility to hunting. Through trial and error, wolves end up with the prey they can capture.



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For livestock, many factors affect vulnerability, including:

- How humans handle the livestock
- Cattle health & nutrition; mineral deficiencies
- Response of livestock to predator pressure
- Terrain/topography
- Mothering instincts of cows
- Single/alone animals, “bunch quitters”
- Scattered cattle vs. grouped herds
- Encounter rate between wolves and livestock
- Carcass scavenging opportunities
- Ungulates mingled with livestock
- Predictable location and movement of prey, including livestock
- Fencing

Understanding the influence of the factors above is essential to developing appropriate ranch-specific conflict risk reduction approaches that also work towards achieving overall ranch goals.

**Key Point:** Understanding how wolves hunt and the concept of vulnerability is crucial to reducing potential predation by wolves.

### **Using Stockmanship to Lower Vulnerability in Cattle while Adding Value to the Ranch**

One way to address cattle vulnerability while adding value to the ranch is through specific herd management practices, including Bud William’s Low-Stress Livestock Handling (LSLH).

Unfortunately, when LSLH principles are not fully understood, the method is often misrepresented, overly simplified, or applied incorrectly. When the principles and techniques are wholly and correctly employed, LSLH has a tremendous capacity to reduce vulnerability to predation while providing economic benefits and increased operational efficacy.

In short, human handling of cattle directly translates to how cattle handle predator pressure. LSLH boosts cattle’s natural defenses to predation by teaching cattle to respond to pressure calmly rather than react in a manner that increases predators’ potential for hunting success. Improving cattle’s ability to handle pressure results in



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less stress when encountering predators, which addresses concerns about stress-induced weight loss.

Spending time preparing cattle through LSLH before they are turned out for grazing season proactively reduces the risk of wolf-livestock conflict and increases its potential for success.

### **Herd Health and Nutrition**

Additional approaches that advance ranch resiliency and reduce the potential for wolf-livestock conflict includes managing herd health and nutrition, prescribed grazing plans, and calving season-specific feeding. Mineral deficiencies in cattle are a common and addressable cause of vulnerability that leads to predation. For example, wolves can detect copper and selenium deficiency (which causes cattle and calves to be in a weakened state) and will take advantage of this vulnerability to secure a successful hunt.

All these ranch management practices are directly in the rancher's control and are more sustainable than trying to control wild wolves. The idea is to manage the cattle vs manage for wolves. This mindset will reduce the risk of predation and increase the strength of the ranch overall.

**Key point:** Manage what is in your control -- your *cattle* vs. what is not in your control – *wild wolves*.

By exploring sustainable opportunities that help build ranches with the co-benefit of reducing vulnerability to predation, everyone is set up for success: the rancher, who lives and works with wolves on the landscape, the NGOs who advocate for wolves, and the wildlife agencies responsible for managing wolves. These are good investments!

*Cattle being cattle and wolves being wolves, conflict will always be a factor. . . However, successful, long-term, and sustainable coexistence, though not easy, is surely possible if we're willing to get beyond our pride and just be smart about it.*

~ Joe Englehart, Ranch Manager, Alberta, Canada

**Key Point:** Investing in sustainable approaches to coexistence based on herd



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and ranch management is essential to long-term success.

Working together, we have an opportunity to get it right for everyone. We have the ability to create a lasting environment for wolves, livestock, and people to coexist and thrive by expanding the narrow focus on traditional tools and strategies and approaching coexistence on a deeper, more meaningful, and comprehensive level - by focusing on the root cause of wolf-livestock conflict.