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## **Wolf-Livestock Conflict Risk Management** **The Root of the Coexistence Challenge**

The concept of coexistence with wolves is often simplified, but there is nothing simple about it. It is complicated and certainly is not easy. In the past ten years, much has been discovered about “coexistence” and what that means. Through this process of discovery, new creative, evolving, and tremendously successful strategies have been found.

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 increases and competition for open space for wildlife and human use increases, co-occurrence with livestock and predators is certain. Wildlife’s dependence on private ranch lands providing habitat and connectivity between public open spaces is also increasing. Ranching is an important 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.

We must look forward instead of backward and focus on newer holistic approaches to the wolf-livestock coexistence challenges we face.

### **The Key is to 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, 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.

Commonly used tools: fladry, traditional range riding, and even compensation programs, buy valuable time and have a significant role. However, we need to expand beyond physical tools, which can function as effective, short-term band-aids but don’t actually solve the problem, and invest more in comprehensive approaches that actually address the root of the wolf-livestock challenge.

The goal is to reduce the potential for conflict, thus saving the lives of cattle and wolves. In doing so, look to practices that also forward the overall ranch goals, thus increasing ranch resiliency and ability to withstand the presence of predators organically. In addition, ranchers need to be set up for success through the ability to lead and manage the potential for conflict as they do their other business practices.

Traditional conflict reduction practices that drain resources, even energetically, inhibit ranchers’ willingness and ability to engage in or proactively implement conflict reduction practices. In addition, if ranchers need to make a change just to accommodate the wolf, further resentment of the wolf is experienced.

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Deterring wolves over thousands of acres is daunting; investing time and energy towards long-term approaches that build the ranch to withstand wolves while lowering vulnerability to predation makes more sense.

### **Managing Less for Wolves and Managing More to Meet the Goals of the Ranch**

More often than not, when approaching coexistence, the focus is first on the conflict, then looking to manage for conflict, the potential for conflict, or manage for wolves.

However, instead of concentrating on the conflict to determine coexistence strategies, we should first work to identify and understand the overall ranch needs. Ranchers face numerous challenges in the modern world. Focusing on strategies that strengthen the ranch overall makes the potential for conflict less of an issue financially, emotionally, and energetically.

***Manage for what you want vs. managing for what you don't want or fear***

~ Hilary Anderson, Crazy D Ranch, Montana

Working Circle has entered a partnership 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 they need 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

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 try to *control* wolves but that fit into the needs of the overall ranch--strategies that focus more on what's in the rancher's control. Trying to control wild wolves is tough; managing one's operation is 100% in the rancher's control.

By supporting conflict risk reduction strategies that also help build the ranch, we, in turn, help wolves, livestock, and people succeed LONG TERM ~ 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.

***Focus on the process of discovery before implementing or selling the "solution"***

~ Hilary Anderson, Crazy D Ranch, Montana

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This is not a one-size fits all scenario. What may make sense on one ranch may not make sense for the other. To support the landowners and managers in developing a road map forward, the following questions need to 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, for one ranch, strategically looking at and building mitigation approaches into their business plan is a valuable use of resources. For another operation, putting resources into conflict mitigation strategies does not make sense because those resources are better put towards addressing other challenges or practices that will get a more significant return on investment or are of a bigger concern. Others may find that some practices that reduce conflict risk have value in other ways, even if they aren't worried about wolves. For each operation, the level of investment will be different, and the actual problem needs to be identified before we can consider solutions. We must follow the rancher's lead – meet folks where they are. It is their ranch, their land, their operation, and their lives.

***One understanding is worth a thousand techniques.***

~ Bill Dorrance

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

***We cannot do our best when fighting against our worst.***

~ Author Unknown

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 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, there are great opportunities in funding, public perception, and market support when ranchers fully embrace their role as stewards of the land and wildlife, including predators. Wolves have the potential to benefit ranchers and ranching far more than cause harm.

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 "telling them how to manage their cattle." It is much simpler to put up fladry, claim that nothing works, or dig in our heels rather than lower our barriers to moving forward and take the time to understand the more complex and nuanced approaches discussed in this document. We must not be afraid to address the

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true breadth of factors influencing coexistence success. We need to push the envelope of our comfort zones in order to finally experience positive long-term outcomes.

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

An example of adding 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 vulnerability in *livestock* creates the opportunity to explore strategic conflict risk reduction practices that reduce the unsustainable outpouring of resources.

***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

Wolf hunting success is highly influenced by prey vulnerability. As wolves circulate around 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.

For livestock, many factors affect vulnerability, including:

- How humans handle the livestock
- 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
- Condition/health of livestock
- Ungulates mingled with livestock
- Predictable location and movement of prey, including livestock
- Fencing

Understanding the above influences is essential to developing appropriate ranch-specific conflict risk reduction approaches.

### **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.

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In brief, humans' handling of cattle directly translates to how cattle handle predator pressure. LSLH teaches cattle to *respond* to pressure rather than *react* to pressure working to boost their natural defenses to predation. Proactively preparing the cattle through LSLH before they are turned out for grazing season further reduces the risk of wolf-livestock conflict. LSLH also resolves concerns about weight loss due to predator presence by increasing cattle's ability to handle pressure, thus lowering stress.

Additional approaches can increase ranch resiliency and reduce the potential for wolf-livestock conflict, including prescribed grazing plans and calving season-specific feeding and stockmanship practices. All these ranch management practices are directly in the rancher's control vs. trying to control wild wolves.

By exploring sustainable opportunities that help build the ranch with the co-benefit of reducing vulnerability to predation, you set everyone 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. This is a good investment!

***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 are willin' to get beyond our pride and just be smart about it.***

*~ Joe Englehart, Ranch Manager, Alberta, Canada*

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 level.

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