

Guest Column: Let's tell the truth about those big, bad wolves

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The return of wolves to the West has always been contentious, and the deaths last fall of more than 40 cattle really in western Colorado alarmed ranchers. But here's the true story: Wolves did not kill those cattle found dead near Meeker.

After months of investigation, the state agency, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, found no evidence of wolves in the area at all.

Yet when the news of the cattle deaths went public last October, the agency issued a press release stating it was "investigating a report of dead domestic cow calves on White River National Forest lands near Meeker that show damage consistent with wolf depredation."

A month later, the agency's Northwest regional manager testified before the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission that though some of the cattle had injuries that appeared to come from wolves, he added: "It's perplexing; it's confusing; it's frustrating, trying to figure out exactly what occurred in this incident." The story of wolves as the culprits, however, made national headlines.

Wolves are coming back to the state naturally and because in 2020, the public passed Prop 114, mandating restoration of wolves by the end of this year. Through a Colorado Open Records Act request, the Humane

Society of the United States obtained documents and photos about the livestock deaths, and shared them with Carter Niemeyer, an expert on wolf-livestock conflict. He is also a member of the state's Technical Working Group on wolf restoration.

In his February 14 report, Niemeyer found that “the evidence at Meeker is inconsistent with wolf attacks.” Niemeyer and veterinarians concluded that the cattle more likely died from “brisket disease,” which commonly afflicts cattle living at high altitudes.

Misunderstandings like this one, which lasted weeks, aren't helpful. Do wolves ever come into conflict with livestock? Yes, but it is relatively rare. In the Northern Rockies where wolves are established, they account for less than 1% of cattle losses.

Disease, birthing problems, weather and theft take nine times as many cattle than all predators combined, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In Washington state, which is home to at least 33 wolf packs after nearly 15 years of wolf recovery, more than 80% of the packs have no conflict with livestock in an average year.

Overall, the threat of wolves to the livestock industry is negligible. For the few livestock producers who are impacted by wolves, it is, of course, economically painful and time consuming.

But options exist for ranchers to safeguard their livestock. Old-fashioned riding the range to drive off wolf packs, cleaning up carcasses so they don't attract wolves, penning up livestock at night, installing scare devices, and using guard dogs are all deterrents that can work.

Unfortunately, data from the United States Department of Agriculture suggest that few livestock owners use these effective, non-lethal mitigation measures.

But many livestock producers across the west — in southern Alberta, the Big Wood River Drainage of Idaho, the Tom Miner Basin and Blackfoot Valley of Montana and elsewhere — do use a variety of these deterrents, which make it possible for their herds to live alongside both wolves and grizzly bears.

To its credit, Colorado Parks and Wildlife has produced a resource guide for livestock producers. To do an even better job as wolves integrate into western Colorado, the state must improve the way it investigates livestock deaths.

These investigations must be timely and transparent — as in other Western states such as Washington — and without scapegoating. The Colorado legislature could do its part, too, by providing funding for a trained, rapid-response team that would immediately investigate livestock injuries and deaths.

According to Niemeyer, authorities must respond as if they were investigating a crime scene — checking out dead livestock within 24 hours to prevent losing evidence from tissue decomposition or scavengers.

Only when a cause is determined, based on evidence, should information be made public. If wolf recovery is going to be successful for both wolves and people, everyone involved — livestock producers, wolf

advocates, agencies — must work together. What happened in Meeker has been a valuable lesson in what not to do.

Story Warren is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She is a program manager in wildlife protection for the Humane Society of the United States.