

HOW CAN FARMERS COEXIST WITH WOLVES?

Wolves, and their predation of livestock, are a major issue for farmers, whether that's a perception or a reality. And large carnivores are coming back to places where they had previously been eliminated, thanks to improved conservation efforts and, as in the case of the Eastern Coyote, one carnivore moving into an ecological niche where it had never been before.

Put simply, farmers care about wolves. But how can we balance the needs and desires of farmers with the protection of large carnivores? [A new study from researchers](#) at the University of Leeds looks at several communities in Spain that are dealing with wolves to find out how best to handle this delicate interaction.

Before we get into this study, it's probably important to note that wolves are not, in any statistically proven way, a significant problem for American ranchers. Some reporting of wolf kills, [such as those from the National Agricultural Statistics Service](#), rely on self-reporting from ranchers, and they do not verify whether wolves were actually responsible for livestock deaths. Wolves and other large predators account for just a small percentage of all livestock losses in the United States; compared with digestive or respiratory illness, predators are not significant.

Even when we look at predator-caused deaths of cattle in the US, wolves are not at the top of the list. Of those deaths, according to [2015 USDA data](#), more than 40 percent of cattle deaths are attributed to coyotes. More than 11 percent are attributed to domestic or feral dogs. Wolves? Less than five percent. That is, incredibly, lower than the cattle deaths attributed to vultures. [It's the same thing for sheep](#): wolves account for only 1.3 percent of sheep deaths attributed to predators, far less than the percentage for both coyotes and dogs. It's worth noting that those are national figures and that predator-attributed deaths are localized. East of the Mississippi, for example, wolf-attributed deaths would be zero. In a handful of areas, wolves might be a much larger issue. But nationally, the numbers stand: Wolves and other predators are not one of the biggest causes of livestock death. Somehow, though, wolves have become a national issue.

The agriculture and forestry industry, with agribusiness-leaning entities such as the American Farm Bureau leading the pack, have made wolves out to be a major problem for American ranchers, [even demanding](#) that wolves be delisted from the Endangered Species Act (which would enable ranchers to shoot and kill them). The researchers behind this new study note this discrepancy. According to lead author Hanna Pettersson, "The main problem with wolves in areas where wolves and people shared space was often less about the wolves themselves, but about economic and social pressures that were threatening the livelihoods, cultures and autonomy of local communities. For different reasons, the wolves often came to represent these pressures."

This is a larger ecological problem, because wolves are among the few large predators still existing in the United States. Having extirpated, either nationally or locally, animals such as the grizzly bear, mountain lion and grey wolf, the animals on which they've preyed (such as deer) have exploded in population and evolved into an environmental issue.

Wolves are an easy scapegoat, regardless of the realities of how detrimental they are to ranching. This study looked at various locations in Spain, where wolves are thriving, often in areas where they had not lived for quite some time. The study finds that there are several methods to cope with both the realities and the perceptions of wolves' impact on agriculture. For the realities, strategies differ based on the specifics of different locations. Guard dogs were found to be very effective in some locations, along with nighttime fencing and accompanying herds while they graze.

But these aren't cheap; large operations will need dozens of dogs, and smaller ones will find it harder to afford the purchase, training and upkeep of dogs, in addition to the labor and construction of fencing. The study suggests that governmental programs would be highly effective if they provided funding and assistance for these sorts of practices, ideally tailored for the local needs of each ranch.

Equally important, though, is education and information. Ranchers, according to this study, have to understand and appreciate their coexistence with wolves and other large predators, and not to see them as an inviolable threat. This idea, though, has been difficult to implement in the US. In the case of coyotes, which are a much larger problem for cattle than wolves (though not endangered at all), [many parts of the country](#) have no history with the animal, because the species has only recently arrived. (The first coyote was spotted in the Northeast for the first time in the mid-to-late 1940s.) There's no sense of historical coexistence, because there is no historical coexistence. And there are also major influencers, such as the American Farm Bureau, which makes predation a talking point.

For wolves, though, the main challenge is to thoughtfully prepare agricultural producers and communities for the animal's return and continued existence. Simple payment for wolf-death schemes have not been effective; it's hard to prove that a wolf killed some of your cattle, for one thing, and that also doesn't serve any kind of preventive or long-term solution. Instead, there must be more detailed plans to fund sustainable protection, and, at least as importantly, encourage a sense of community with the wolves. They're a part of the landscape of North America, and this whole concept would require a lot of dialogue between the government and livestock producers to figure out the best way forward.