

Yellowstone grazing allotments

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Photo © Rick Metzger

Stephen Gordon lost more cattle to grizzly and wolves than any other rancher in his neck of the woods. In the 20 years that he ran his Diamond G Ranch herd on the Dunoir federal grazing allotment just east of Grand Teton National Park, predators killed between 200 and 250 calves. Since 1999, wolves also killed four horses and nine dogs, three of which stained Gordon's porch red with blood.

Those losses were a significant hit to the checkbook and the spirit, says Gordon. "We're not just talking about losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in livestock, but also the amount of effort to try to keep wolves out of the cattle, like having all our ranch hands out in the herd all night."

State and federal wildlife agencies were also losing on the deal. Wildlife Services and the Wyoming Department of Game and Fish spent considerable time and energy killing 13 wolves and relocating 8 wolves and several bears in the past nine years.

Hoping to help everyone involved, including wildlife, the Forest Service retired the 49,000-acre Dunoir allotment in February with the help of the National Wildlife Federation. The Forest Service also retired the 33,700-acre Icehouse/Willow Creek allotment in Idaho, 20 miles west of Yellowstone National Park. Both retirements are part of a wildlife federation program designed to help ranchers buy leases away from core predator habitat. The conservation group pays ranchers a market value based on an allotment's size and the amount of forage available there. It then works with federal land managers to retire the allotment. On the surface, the two most recent retirements, like those before it, seem to benefit all parties. But for Gordon, the deal is the high card in a losing hand.

Since their Wildlife Conflict Resolution program began in 2002, The National Wildlife Federation has paid about \$2 million for at least 27 allotments in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. In total, the program has opened an area twice the size of Grand Teton National Park— about 500,000 acres — for wildlife habitat. Problems on the lands have ranged from bears munching mutton to concerns that bison may spread brucellosis to cattle.

"We've retired the most contentious livestock regions in the area, the ones that have been the knock down drag out fights for ten or more years," says Hank Fischer, a coordinator for the conservation group. Surprisingly, none has been controversial, he says, because the group targets ranching operations like Gordon's where wildlife conflicts are hurting the bottom line.

The program seems to benefit all stakeholders: Agencies spend less time, energy and money killing or moving problem predators; bears, wolves, moose, elk and other wildlife can expand their ranges, interact with other populations, and take advantage of critical spring and fall habitat; and ranchers often use their payments from the environmental group to lease other land where they lose fewer animals.

But despite the payments, some ranchers simply can't find new range for their herds, says Gordon. "The problem is, my allotment was adjacent to my land, and if I lease land somewhere else, I have to truck my cattle there," he says. "I can't do that. I already truck them twice."

Although Gordon calls the program "better than nothing," he would rather run livestock and have a business than be bought out. "I think the program benefits everybody," he says, "but in some senses we're being forced to do this because of the wolf reintroduction." Gray wolves were reintroduced in the area in 1994 and 1995, and before that Gordon says he had much less depredation.

Gordon will continue to graze cattle on the lower 14,500 acres of the Dunoir lease, where grazing is still open and roads and some buildings have already been built. He has cut his herd in half, and is concerned about making ends meet with a smaller venture.

While the change may hurt Gordon, Fischer can think of only one other instance where a rancher didn't use his payment to buy a grazing lease elsewhere. And the absence of Gordon's cattle should benefit Yellowstone wolves. Meanwhile, the Icehouse/Willow Creek retirement is great news for grizzly bears, says Kim Barber, a bear biologist with the Shoshone National Forest. "Grizzly just can't resist the opportunity to kill a sheep," he says. "It's like a kid in a candy store." Icehouse/Willow Creek was the last sheep operation within a designated grizzly conservation area that surrounds the park, although some U.S. Department of Agriculture sheep do cross the conservation area to reach other ranges.

Although the allotments could be reopened for grazing, Fischer doesn't foresee it happening. "At this point we haven't heard any inclination at all to reopen these allotments once they're closed," he says. "Keep in mind, these are allotments that have caused headaches and drained agency resources for years. Would you want to hit yourself in the head with a hammer again?"

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