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People and Nature: Our Future Is in the Balance

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**GRAZING RETIREMENT:
AN IMPORTANT NEW APPROACH TO
LARGE CARNIVORE CONSERVATION**

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Carnivores 2004 Conference
Santa Fe, New Mexico
November 17, 2004

Wolf and grizzly bear populations are faring well in national parks and wilderness areas that comprise the primary part of their current range in the Northern Rockies. But once large carnivores leave these protected areas, death rates typically rise dramatically. A leading cause of bear and wolf mortality outside of these primary conservation areas is conflict with domestic livestock.

Grazing retirements can create large carnivore habitat that is secure from conflicts with cows and sheep. Such retirements not only can increase the size of core habitats, but they can also eliminate high mortality areas. Grazing retirements can also enhance the likelihood that large carnivores moving outside of core habitats can connect with other populations and avoid isolation. Additionally, grazing retirements seem to increase the social tolerance for large carnivores by reducing or eliminating a major source of economic and social dissatisfaction. Finally, these retirements reduce the amount of agency time and funds that must be expended to deal with conflicts, which frees up resources to address other conservation needs. Perhaps most compelling, targeted allotment retirements seem to meet the needs of all parties: government agencies, conservation organizations, and ranchers.

How significantly bears and wolves expand their ranges beyond national parks and wildernesses will be predicated almost entirely by how effectively we resolve conflicts on public lands between livestock and large carnivores. In this

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paper we discuss our experience with retiring grazing allotments on National Forest lands surrounding Yellowstone National Park from 2002 to 2004.

One of the first significant attempts to deal with conflicts between livestock and large carnivores was Defenders of Wildlife's wolf compensation program that started in 1987. Defenders' program compensated livestock producers at market value for all verified losses caused by wolves. In 1997 Defenders expanded that program to include grizzly bears. These programs have since paid out more than a half-million dollars to livestock producers. Many credit Defenders' wolf compensation program as a key factor in advancing wolf restoration to Yellowstone Park and central Idaho.

As a consequence of this program, Defenders learned that many producers have creative ideas for how to prevent predation from occurring in the first place. These ideas resulted in development of the Proactive Predator Conservation Fund. Under this program, Defenders shares with ranchers the cost of management actions designed to prevent predation. Minette Johnson and Suzanne Stone have effectively expanded that program during the last several years for both wolves and bears.

Despite compensation payments and conscious efforts to prevent problems, large carnivore/livestock problems persist in some locations. To address this situation, in 2002 the National Wildlife Federation initiated a project to retire public land grazing allotments that experience chronic conflict with wolves and bears. The Wyoming Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep and the Grand Canyon Trust were early leaders in retiring livestock grazing allotments and provided valuable counsel.

Our first step was to prioritize which allotments should be retired. To do this we first sent a survey to leading scientists, wildlife managers, and conservation experts in the Northern Rockies. We asked them to identify criteria we should use to develop allotment retirement candidates. They suggested we give priority to: 1) areas adjacent to core recovery areas or key wildlife corridors; 2) sheep allotments over cattle allotments; 3) areas where problems can be resolved by retirement of a small number of allotments; and 4) areas where large carnivore conflicts are frequent and persistent.

Based on these factors we conducted a GIS mapping process to produce a visual display indicating the highest priority areas. This process isolated and ranked those allotments that experienced the greatest number of conflicts over the

longest periods—our rationale was to identify those that posed chronic conflict and mortality risk to large carnivores. At the end of this process we had identified 15 high-priority cattle and sheep allotments where allotment retirement would accomplish the greatest large carnivore conservation. In addition, we developed a chart that provided a first and second tier of livestock allotment retirement candidates.

With this analysis in hand we began to contact producers who held the leases on our priority list. My experience with administering Defenders' compensation programs for 15 years facilitated this work, as many of the livestock producers already knew me.

When we contact ranchers we emphasize that the retirements are strictly voluntary. When a rancher indicates willingness to consider allotment retirement, we then negotiate a cash incentive payment that the rancher receives in exchange for his agreement to waive his grazing privileges back to the federal government without preference to another livestock producer. To the extent we focus exclusively on allotments with chronic problems, producers are often motivated to seek solutions because the predator conflicts are causing economic hardship.

Simultaneously, we approach the federal land management agency that manages the lease (usually the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management) to ensure that the agency is prepared to permanently retire the allotment. While one might surmise that getting the livestock producer to agree to retirement is the greatest challenge of this approach, persuading agencies to retire allotments has its own set of challenges.

Permanent retirement of the lease by the government agency is essential for the National Wildlife Federation to complete the transaction and retire the allotment. Without certainty that the allotment will be permanently retired, conservation groups cannot in good faith ask donors to contribute to the program. In many cases the Forest Service has an adequate basis for permanently retiring grazing allotments based on forest plan direction. This is particularly true when dealing with threatened and endangered species like wolves and bears. The Targhee National Forest, for instance, has language in its forest plan that allows for retirement of sheep grazing allotments in Situation 1 grizzly bear habitat as opportunity permits. Similarly, the Bridger-Teton National Forest has language in its forest plan that permits retirement of grazing allotments with chronic conflict between grizzlies and cattle.

In cases where agencies do not have forest plan direction that facilitates closure of grazing allotments, the agencies either must do an amendment to their forest plan or wait until they prepare their next forest plan. If they do a forest plan amendment, it's important to develop a strong administrative record that details the reasons for the grazing retirement. Because these are administrative decisions, some people worry that future forest supervisors might undo these grazing retirements. But in order to "unretire" an allotment, the forest officers would need to show that the previous reasons for retiring the allotment were no longer valid. He or she would also have to go through a similar environmental analysis process where the decision could be challenged by appeal or in court.

Since 2002 the National Wildlife Federation has been involved in retiring seven livestock grazing allotments totaling about 125,000 acres. Total cost of these retirements has been about \$525,000. In every circumstance the livestock producer has been satisfied by the transaction and has made positive public comments to that effect. In almost every case, the rancher has taken the incentive payment and used it to secure new grazing in a location without significant large carnivore conflicts.

When federal agencies created public land grazing allotments over a century ago, they permitted them almost anywhere grass was available. But as conservation on public lands evolved, the need to weigh and balance competing uses increased. This became more acute as Congress passed new laws dealing with multiple use, conservation of watersheds, and protection of endangered species.

Although sometimes not recognized by agencies, grazing leases on public lands have real economic value. Ranchers buy and sell them, and banks make loans based on their value. Failure to recognize the economic value of these grazing leases has resulted in contentious, highly-politicized battles over where grazing should occur on public lands.

A market approach to changing grazing patterns can turn opponents of wildlife conservation into partners and provide a positive solution to chronic conflicts between livestock and large carnivores. We believe this grazing retirement approach can provide a new conservation model that reduces litigation, sustains agriculture, and reconfigures grazing to locations where it is compatible and sustainable.

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