
GUEST COMMENTARY

Predator control for U.S. ranchers: a history of government sabotage

by Don Meike, Chairman, National Woolgrowers Association



The problem of predator control that Western ranchers face is not well appreciated. The attack on predator control programs and methods was one of the first springboards for the environmentalist movement. Interior Secretary James Watt and Agriculture Secretary John Block have expressed their resolve to restore a vigorous U.S. predator control program. With this in mind, EIR presents this history of the fight on the issue of predator control, contributed by Don Meike, chairman of the board of the National Woolgrowers Association. Meike lives in Kaycee, Wyoming, where he is co-manager of Peter Meike & Sons, Inc., a sheep and cattle ranch operating on 30,000 acres of rangeland and 1,200 acres of irrigated cropland.

There were many forces at play in the decline of the U.S. sheep population to its present level of 12½ million head, and predation was certainly one of them. In fact, it was the numerical decline itself that singled out the sheep industry for the envirocratic attack.

In 1971, a few dead eagles were found in central Wyoming. Tests revealed that the eagles had died from thallium sulphate, an illegal, nonselective, and cumulative poison. Thallium had previously been abandoned for use in the animal damage control program carried out by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior. In the minds of the general public, all toxicants were immediately under indictment.

A combination of chemicals were being used by field agents to reduce coyote impact in major sheep areas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with state governments, placed control devices, treated baits, and mechanical equipment in the field. The costs of these programs were borne by ranchers, state agencies, and the federal government. Sodium monofluoroacetate (Compound 1080), sodium cyanide, or strychnine were located by professionals in areas where sheep and lamb kills were frequent and extensive.

Even with this comprehensive program, predation continued. The losses were unwillingly absorbed by some ranchers, while others were forced out of business. The sheep industry had struggled to recover from the effects of artificial fibers and imported lamb meat, but of all factors considered, the predation of sheep by eagles,

dogs, and coyotes was the most destructive element affecting the industry. Stockgrowers can't control the weather, taxes, or consumer demand for their products. They can suppress predator damage to the herds.

Shortly after the dead eagles were found, the Defenders of Wildlife and the Sierra Club filed suit in district court in Washington, D.C. to halt the animal damage control program. Their suit charged injury to several species of wildlife, and possible danger to humans.

A secret agreement

The suit was denied, but the Defenders and the Sierra Club continued their harassment and threats of legal reprisal to the point that an assistant secretary of the interior, Nathaniel Reed, was prompted to make a secret deal with the two environmental groups. A sealed stipulation between the principals agreed that the Interior Department would remove all toxicants from the predator management program if the Defenders and Sierra Club would forego additional legal actions.

The only problem was that there was no official basis for the removal of the toxicants; no hearings, no legislation, etc. Assistant Secretary Reed chose a yet to be completed document on predation (the Cain Report) as the rationale. Curiously, when the Cain Report was finished, it not only recognized the value of some toxicants, but recommended the retention of Compound 1080.

Nevertheless, Executive Order No. 11643 was signed by Richard Nixon in January 1972, suspending the use of toxic chemicals for predator control.

A lawsuit by the State of Wyoming against Interior subsequently uncovered the sealed stipulation. It was the first step in removing the predator control program from the field of science, into the political domain. Then the Environmental Protection Agency abolished the registration of chemicals used in the predator management program. EPA's cancellation order was inaccurate and misleading in its charges, particularly where Compound 1080 was concerned. EPA cited 13 human deaths recorded from the use of 1080. What they failed to mention was that these fatalities occurred only in urban areas where the chemical is used for rodent control!

The Environmental Protection Agency also erroneously claimed that sodium fluoracetate is highly toxic to all species. This claim is contrary to reams of scientific information emphasizing the selectivity of the chemical when used in proper dosage. EPA cancelled the registration and then refused to hold a hearing on the cancellation.

The least tolerant species affected by 1080 is the canine. Consequently, the chemical is effective in coyote control. As the Western Regional Coordinating Committee, a consortium of 31 eminent scientists, recently stated: "Since there are no known human safety hazards if reasonable care is used, and no significant primary or secondary hazards to non-target animals, no biological reason supports prohibiting the use of Compound 1080."

The chain of events surrounding the executive order led to confusion among the general public and exploitation by politicians and environmental action groups. Well-publicized hearings were held in Washington before committees charged with environmental responsibility. Empty promises of accelerated research and the emphasis of "mechanical" control techniques as a substitute for the toxicants sent the wool growers home with a gleam of hope.

But over the next seven years, 8½ million lambs and 2½ million sheep worth a respectable \$592 million would be destroyed by coyotes and dogs. Coincidentally during the same period, sheep numbers would drop by 8½ million head, the number of lambs killed by coyotes during that same period. Several states filed for emergency use of 1080, but these requests were turned down. 11,000 sheep ranchers went out of business, attributing their enterprise failure to predators.

The State of Wyoming filed a lawsuit claiming that the government erred when it cancelled the registration on 1080 without an environmental impact statement, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The district court found in favor of the suit and suspended the federal ban on the interstate shipment of toxicants. The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the ruling and the Supreme Court refused to hear the case. The 10th Circuit, a pawn of the Eastern environmental community, then ordered the district court not to hear the issue, as it related to the cancellation of 1080. The lawsuit was gutted.

In 1977, the National Wool Growers again appealed to the Department of the Interior, requesting relief from accelerating predation. Secretary of Interior Cecil Andrus offered another study, and eventually an environmental impact statement on the predation issue.

Andrus and the CEQ

The draft version of the Environmental Impact Statement was condemned by both the environmental

interests and the wool growers. The final EIS was reluctantly accepted. Secretary Andrus then promised a revised policy for Animal Damage Control based on the EIS. Sheep growers relied on scientific proof as assurance that the revised program would endorse accelerated control methods.

It was on Nov. 9, 1980 when the sheep people realized that the amended control policy was a political document. The policy Andrus announced was a non-lethal, non-capture approach banning or restricting the few remaining tools left in the program. It was later determined that the policy was designed by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), without regard for even the Environmental Impact Statement. CEQ has consistently maintained that livestock losses can be reduced without lethal control although the methods they propose are too expensive, ineffective, unproven or have limited application.

Sheep growers again requested hearings on predator control, with the usual results. The environmentalists charged the rancher with a failure to provide adequate protection for his flocks, and the rancher accused the environmentalists of aborting the facts. The scientists again defended the control program and the elected officials remained somewhere in the middle.

Shortly after the hearings, 13 major agricultural organizations requested the transfer of the Animal Damage Control program to the Department of Agriculture. In January 1981, Sen. James McClure (D-Idaho) attached an amendment to the agriculture appropriations bill that would transfer the program to USDA. The amendment passed the Senate by a substantial vote, but Congressman Jamie Whitten held up the proposal in the joint conference committee on the basis it wasn't germane to the "money" bill. After nine long years, it was another disappointment for the wool growers. The conference committee stipulated that \$500,000 was to be appropriated to study the transfer. The sheep people groaned at the prospect of another lengthy analysis.

There is little need for further research on coyotes or predation since over 5,000 studies already exist. There has been enough litigation, emergency use requests, and experimental use inquiries. Sheep have been dipped in garlic, spray painted, and fitted with collars. Ranchers have been harangued and harassed by the government and environmental groups.

The Animal Damage Control Act of March 2, 1931 directs the secretary of the interior to control predators. There are no legitimate scientific or environmental reasons why the law shouldn't be enforced. To further deny the sheepmen the right to protect his private property disparages the Constitution and perpetuates a glaring federal injustice. America needs lamb and wool. Does America need an uncontrolled coyote population?