

Workshop Teaches Ranchers Strategies for Coping with Growing Wolf Population

by Gail Kimberling
of the Hells Canyon Journal

Producers and the public gathered at the Halfway Lions Community Hall for two days this month to discuss and learn ways to cope with the growing wolf population in Northeast Oregon. The group included 56 individuals representing Baker, Union, Umatilla, Grant and Klamath counties in Oregon and Ada County in Idaho.

The featured speaker was Hilary Anderson, a Montana rancher and co-founder of the Tom Miner Basin Range Rider Project.

Other participants and speakers included Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett; Roblyn Brown, wolf coordinator for Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW); and Brian Ratliff, district wildlife biologist with the ODFW Baker City Field Office.

The January 10 and 11 workshop was spearheaded and organized by Pine Valley ranchers Shella and Barry DelCurto. Sponsors were United Community Partners, Inc., ODFW, Defenders of Wildlife, U.S. Bank, Northwest Farm Credit Services, Boehringer Ingelheim, Pacific Intermountain Mortgage Company, Eagle Telephone System, Zoetis, and Merck, with additional donations from Robin Kerns, Baker County Cattlewomen, Baker County Wolf Committee, Evan Kaeseberg of Sunfire Realty and Liz McLellan Strategy.

"This is a major topic. We have accepted grudgingly we are going to have wolves now. We have to figure out how to have balance in the livestock industry so it not only survives but thrives," Commissioner Bennett, who is also a producer and a lead in the state's wolf management discussion, said.

Proactive Versus Reactive

Anderson and her husband operate a sprawling ranch on the outskirts of Yellowstone Park, in an area with one of the three highest densities of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states.

"Grizzlies make wolves look like cake," Anderson commented.

Compared to grizzly bears, wolf behavior is more predictable and becoming more understood, making coexistence possible.

Anderson, who is also a wildlife biologist, said, "Right now we do not understand bears at the same level as wolves. With wolves, we now feel a sense of empowerment so we can make decisions that are sound and have good results."

When wolves first entered the Andersons' territory in the late 1990s, the couple relied heavily on outside agencies



Photo by Gail Kimberling

PRESENTER AND ORGANIZER – Hilary Anderson (left) was a main presenter at the workshop and Shella DelCurto, Pine Valley rancher who helped organize the event.

for information and advice.

"Part of our frustration in dealing with agencies is some were transparent, and some were not," Anderson said. "Now, it has completely shifted. We took the initiative and we are the ones out in the field uncovering information and telling them what's going on. Our dependence on agencies at this stage of the game is next to nothing."

Anderson said it took a change in attitude to make the shift from being reactive to proactive – not just for predators like wolves, but also for other challenges such as weeds, drought and wildfire.

She explained they are now managing for healthy cattle and herd units instead of managing for reduced wolf numbers; managing for healthy grass and soils instead of managing for fewer weeds; and working towards a diverse healthy rangeland rather than just fire suppression.

"Without a doubt we use both proactive and reactive measures every day, but we start with the proactive. Our approach is to build a core, rather than react on the periphery," Anderson said.

When it comes to wildlife management, Anderson said the proactive approach is to minimize the probability of conflicts before they occur as opposed to the reactive, waiting for conflicts and then having wildlife management take drastic, sometimes lethal, measures.

"We are managing for what we want, not for what we don't want," Anderson said. "Our goal is to pass on an economically viable operation to our next generation. We don't want to just ranch until it runs dry or sell or move or pass on a struggling

operation. We want our kids to want to ranch and have hope." She added, "The number one worst thing that can happen beyond wolves or anything is subdividing and selling out. We love the wide open landscape, and we want to preserve our landscape and resources, so we were motivated to make the ranch as strong and resilient as possible."

Resilient Ranching

Anderson described resilient ranching as "growing the capacity to hold multiple values and withstand the tests and changes of time."

While admitting a calf lost to wolves feels different than a calf lost to pneumonia, Anderson advised producers to start with an open frame of mind and complete objectivity,

"Learn about your predators, the food source availability, the habitat connectivity, where wolves are overlapping with your cattle, and then incorporate that knowledge into your grazing plan," Anderson explained, adding, "You cannot make good management decisions based on myth."

Early on, Anderson said, "It was easy to call someone, and someone would come. But eventually people stopped answering and stopped coming so we were more and more on our own and no better off 10 years later than on day one. Our investment in solutions has gotten us much further than waiting for fish and wildlife to do something."

"None of us wanted wolves in the first place, but they are here – and so are drought, wildfire and other factors," Anderson said.

Common management practices can often lead to predation, Anderson explained,

saying, "We raise prey, and wolves will always be hunters."

These common practices include highly scattered herds, long calving periods, a low human presence, aggressive handling ("We and our dogs cannot be the equivalent of wolves in the minds of cows," Anderson said), and leaving sick or injured cattle out with a herd.

"We can't just turn cattle out and go home. That doesn't work anymore," Anderson said.

The Andersons adjusted their management practices to decrease the vulnerability of their livestock by:

- running gathered herds of cattle;
- low stress handling;
- progressive range management;
- high human presence, mainly through range riding;
- shortened calving periods;
- quick doctoring and care; and,
- factoring in predator presence with pasture types and grazing plans.

"These are not black and white, but guidelines," Anderson said.

She added it was important for other ranchers in the area to also adopt these practices, and said, "Community collaboration has helped relieve the responsibility and pressure of just one ranch taking the risks."

Conflict Versus Challenge

"My husband, Andrew, never looked at wolves as a conflict. A challenge, yes, but a conflict, no," Anderson said. "He saw the crisis as an opportunity and now we have a thriving operation to meet our goal of passing it on to the next generation. We were never really mad, it was just another challenge, like the sage grouse or the grayling."

Early on, Anderson said the state of Montana killed four wolves and paid out \$12,000 following two calf depredations.

"The light bulb went on, and we thought this isn't the right path," Anderson said. "There were still losses and it was costing a lot of money. We asked, what can we do that's different?"

"Plenty of our neighbors are still mad and still working through it, but that doesn't translate into a sustainable operation ready to be passed on," she continued.

"But we all have skin in the game, and we are all on one planet. If one ranch is going down the drain or having issues or subdividing, we all suffer. The actions we take do effect each other and in the long run a healthy landscape is our goal."

Further details about ranching with wolves and the wolf issue in Oregon will be featured in upcoming editions of the *Hells Canyon Journal*