

The Social and Mental Impacts of Unmanaged Wolf Depredations on Ranchers and Livestock Producers

My name is Kelly Birkmaier, I am married to Tom Birkmaier who testified on behalf of HB2631 & HB2633. Tom requested that I write up the social and mental impacts that the wolves have had on our family. I will focus this write-up on the last year. We are a ranching family who work very hard to maintain a healthy animal livestock operation. My husband takes great pride in calving out our cattle in a manner that allows us to have almost 100% of our pregnant cows nursing a calf when we move them from the calving fields onto the rangelands in the spring. My husband's work ethic and knowledge is so vast that often times he receives calls and helps to diagnose and save the lives of cattle on other local ranches.

Tom's drive to raise a healthy and profitable cattle herd does not stop with calving, throughout the summer he is diligent in supplying mineral salt, for nutritional needs, maintaining fences, and performing herd health checks in the most rugged areas of Wallowa County. His ambition was the same when the wolves began preying on our cattle. Tom's drive and ability to solve any cattle problem was put to the test. He was certain he would be able to provide enough non-lethal that the wolves would be persuaded against attacking our cattle. Unfortunately, Tom was found wrong.

The emotional stress that this created for Tom was unbearable to watch as a spouse. Not only was Tom lacking in sleep, (already deprived from calving), but with all of the work and diligence that he put into the non-lethal, he could not keep his cattle safe. An analogy that we can all relate to is as follows: you have a home which your family has lived in for 70 years. Home is a safe place, you know all the "nooks and crannies", and have your valuables stored there. One day a thief comes in and robs the house. Now, you may feel uneasy where you have always been safe, so you take precautions to ensure that the thief does not come back, and yet, the thief comes again and again. No matter how much you try, or what you do, you are being robbed. That is the emotional toll these ranchers and livestock producers take. We work very hard to have a calf crop we can be proud of. These animals are not just a piece of merchandise, but a living breathing being that trusts the rancher. This creates a respected relationship between the animal and the producer. Then suddenly, these animals are taken, and the producer feels helpless.

Now, we have not even discussed the emotional and mental toll the rest of the family endures. As a wife I can tell you that it is tough. Generally, Tom is with the cattle for two months during calving and rarely gets to spend time with the kids. Once calving is over, we typically get to have dad around more. Last year, the depredations happened within a week of moving the cattle on to the rangelands. This meant that for another two months not only was Tom not home, but the kids were missing their dad and acting out. I had to continue to play both mom and dad. This also meant that I was responsible for all the business aspects of the ranch closer to town such as irrigation/field maintenances, bills and paperwork, and ranch decisions. Further, I had to remain a rock for a man who was breaking.

All the non-lethal also meant that other obligations were not being accomplished such as fence maintenance and supplying mineral salt for the livestock. If Tom had free time, it was spent doing the chores that had to be done, and not spending time with the family. There are no weekends or holidays in this business, and the compounding work requirements that accompanied the wolf predations meant even more overtime. This level of emotional, mental and physical stress is not healthy, nor should it be acceptable in a society that continues to stress the importance of mental health.

Thank you for your time, Kelly Birkmaier.