Sheep producer ponders wolf impact

LAMONT, Wash. — Sheep producer Art Swannack says the secret to dealing with wolves killing livestock is documentation. “It’s kind of bureaucratic, but if you don’t document it, you don’t have anything to show that you had a problem,” he said.

Swannack, also a Whitman County commissioner, served on the 4-year wolf working group that helped develop the wolf management plan for the state. Now he’s using that knowledge first-hand. Swannack estimates he’s lost four sheep to wolves, one confirmed by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, one considered likely and two missing. He’s also missing a guard dog. He keeps a flock of 1,200 sheep near Lamont, Wash.

Swannack’s sheep were grazing a 300-acre field of wheat stubble with portable electric fence surrounding it. The sheep got out Dec. 5 when the fence shorted out due to rain and ice, and moved into a neighbor’s stubble field, where wolves likely killed one ewe. Swannack fixed the fence, but a portable post popped out when rain made the ground soft 10 days later, and wolves killed to three more.

It was the first time Swannack is aware of wolves in the area. “We’ve had coyotes forever, but coyotes are always around,” he said.

Neighbors and friends say they’ve spotted wolves near Lamont, Ritzville and Sprague, including a pair — a large gray wolf and a black wolf. Some calves have disappeared recently, increasing suspicions that wolves are involved, Swannack said. “We haven’t seen anything else, but it makes you suspicious when you have three animals killed and there’s nothing left within 24 hours,” he said. Coyotes typically leave half a carcass the first few days, he noted.

Joey McCanna, private lands and wildlife conflict supervisor for the fish and wildlife department in St. John, Wash., hopes to verify the wolf pair sighting and set out more cameras. “Between the electric fence and the Foxlights, we haven’t had any wolves come into the sheep to kill, but the fence isn’t 3 feet tall,” he said.

The Swannacks added guard dogs, are replacing some fencing and adding night penning, and will continue monitoring. Swannack estimated his total cost to be roughly $6,000, putting the cost of replacing his pregnant ewes at $600 each and a guard dog at several thousand dollars, plus time and labor.

Swannack is concerned about county residents whose cattle will be calving during January and February. Most deer have moved south for the winter, leaving little wildlife and plenty of livestock for the wolves, he said. The department may add fladry — a string of flags — during lambing, he said, but fladry can be good for two to 60 days, depending on how the wolves react to it.

Swannack said the state needs to begin making decisions about management as wolf problems increase. He hopes to see the wolves delisted as an endangered species to allow ranchers more management options.

Swannack said wolves weren’t originally envisioned to be living in the private pasture grounds of Whitman and Adams counties. “Ideally, I’d like to not have any more problems. I don’t think that’s realistic, I expect once in a while I’ll have a problem,” he said. “But continuing, ongoing problems with wolves aren’t acceptable.”

Reports should be made to the Spokane office at 509-892-1001 or online, he said. A dead lamb found Dec. 20 was determined to be a coyote depredation, McCanna said.

The department installed Foxlights around the pasture and near the Swannacks’ home. Foxlights, which are battery-powered, give the impression that somebody is patrolling the area with a flashlight.