

OUR VIEW

Oregon ranchers face tough choice

Ranchers in Oregon’s wolf country face a dilemma when their livestock or guard dog turns up dead or badly injured — report it to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and wait a day or two for a response, or ignore it and eat the cost of the animal.

That’s not much of a choice, particularly because wolves have been in Oregon for 14 years now. That’s plenty of time for the state’s wildlife managers to come up with a better system for determining how an animal died.

Fewer ranchers are even bothering to report wolf attacks on their animals. The state’s own statistics show that. Yet, the state insists only its biologists can do the inspections.

The problem with that is the delay in getting a state biologist to the scene of a depredation. In just a day or two, scavengers can strip the carcass and destroy the evidence.

The state faces two challenges.

The first: ODFW is understaffed. The department has just hired three people who will be spread across the



Photo courtesy of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife/ An Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife wildlife biologist investigates carcass remains and the area around it.

entire state. And once the reality of budget cuts brought on by the COVID-19 shutdowns take hold, the odds of adding more staff — or even keeping staff — will likely shrink.

The second: Most depredations take place in the backcountry. Getting there is often not quick or easy.

Especially in the eastern

one-third of the state where the federal Endangered Species Act does not make ranchers put up with wolves that repeatedly kill livestock, the state needs to step up its activities. The department can come across as wolf apologists instead of managers.

Some sheriff’s offices and veterinarians say they are ready, willing and able to

inspect livestock carcasses and determine a cause of death.

We think sheriff’s offices have better things to do than to investigate animal-on-animal crime scenes.

However, ODFW should enlist the help of veterinarians and ranchers themselves when they are unable to investigate a predation scene in a timely manner.

Most ranchers carry smartphones and are able to take photos and video. We suspect most ranchers in areas where wolves are present have read a number of ODFW Livestock Depredation Investigation Reports, so they know what biologists are looking for. These reports are online on the ODFW website, and make for an interesting reading.

They include the who-what-when-where details of an attack on an animal in a section called “General situation and animal information.” This includes details, such as a description of the land on which the animal was found, the age and size of the animal, the condition of the body, an estimate of the date of death and evidence of scavenging

by coyotes or other animals. Ranchers can provide much of this information, along with photos and videos of the scene.

The section called “Physical evidence and summary of findings” includes details such as animal tracks in the area and blood trails. Usually, the carcass of the animal is skinned and examined for bite marks. The spacing between tooth marks indicates the size and the type of predator. A rancher or veterinarian with some training could use a camera and tape measure to take photos showing this information.

As the wolf population continues to increase in Oregon — at least 158 are in the state, mainly in the northeast corner — ODFW biologists will need to use all available resources and technology to investigate livestock deaths in a timely manner. They should be willing to enlist the help of ranchers and veterinarians if they are spread too thin.

For ranchers, a lot of money is at stake in the form of dead livestock. For the state’s biologists, their credibility is at stake.

FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK

How to handle a crisis

I’ve no doubt Melody Johnson has had a tough week. She is the executive director of Grande Ronde Retirement Residence, La Grande, which has four employees out after they tested positive for COVID-19.

The Observer reported the situation in a Tuesday front page story, some of the latest in our coverage of the pandemic’s damaging local effects.

Johnson could have ducked and ignored our request to talk about a difficult situation. We’re still getting the silent treatment from the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Island City that is at the heart of the county’s outbreak. But Johnson did the opposite. She spoke with reporter Ronald Bond on the record, and there was nothing ambiguous in her statements.

When the test results came, she said, Grande Ronde Retirement Residence wasted no time notifying family members, health authorities and other agencies.

A look at the facility’s Facebook page shows Johnson has been making regular posts for weeks with updates about coronavirus tests results and the steps to mitigate contact.

Johnson on Wednesday reported Grande Ronde Retirement Residence received results from 30 employees, and still

only the four were positive. She updated Facebook on Thursday, reporting the facility expects the rest of its employee test results as soon as Saturday, and the company’s Health Services Director Sheri Volk tested all residents on the assisted living side. Those results should be back next week.

Likewise, Northwood Investments, the parent company to both Out-

doors RV and Northwood Manufacturing in La Grande, reported this week it had five confirmed cases of COVID-19 at its Outdoors RV facility. Once again, a local business let the public know.

Doing the right thing can be difficult, but Johnson and Northwood Investments did the right thing. That is the kind of outreach and transparency that builds trust and good will with the community.

They deserve the community’s thanks and praise.

And Johnson in particular is an example of what to do in a crisis.

She posted on Facebook — yet again — on Thursday: “Our commitment to you all throughout this process is to keep you all updated and be as transparent as possible.”

Johnson has demonstrated she backs up her words with actions.

That’s a valuable lesson for all of us at any time.



PHIL WRIGHT  
OBSERVER EDITOR

MY VOICE

Pastors need to speak up if those in authority won’t

I am saddened by what I see in this community. After repeated, worldwide pleas on the part of the medical professionals to social distance and wear masks in public, now we see the results of the cavalier attitudes of many of our citizens, especially younger ones.

Having grown up in the United Kingdom, I look with interest at the response and attitude of the different countries.

While I understand the United States is built on a culture of individual freedom and personal rights, I believe many Americans see this as a ticket to do what feels good to them regardless of the consequences if they feel their own rights are violated.

Compare this to the U.K. and European countries that have been more intentional and deliberate in ordering their citizens to comply with rules, and, as a result, have not seen the upsurge of infection of COVID-19 as currently being witnessed in the USA.

While some states are finally seeing the need to take a firmer stand against the virus by closing their borders, many local and state authorities are reluctant to enforce any commonsense rules, merely “recommending” behaviors that have proved effective in restraining the spread of the virus.

They want to leave it to individual discretion as to whether these “suggestions” are followed in case they somehow violate someone’s rights. No matter that people are infected by the hundreds in the community and possibly will die.

We only have to look at what has happened in Union County the last couple of weeks with the behavior of the Lighthouse Pentecostal

Church in Island City.

As a believer in Christ and a member of a church in La Grande, I am appalled at the stubbornness of a body of believers who not only insist on pursuing their beliefs at the peril of the community but choose to interpret the word of God in a manner that violates Christ’s words when tempted by Satan, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”

I am no theologian, but I choose to interpret Christ’s message to love all people and show compassion to those in need, which means paying attention to how my actions affect other people — in this case, the most vulnerable in our community.

I struggle with my attitude toward my brothers and sisters in Christ at the Lighthouse Church, and while I commend their commitment to their beliefs and their faith, I worry about what kind of witness they are to non-believers. Will they listen to anyone else? Will they follow the rules of quarantine?

I challenge the pastors in this community to collectively hold the pastors of the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church accountable in the same way as we are commissioned to do on an individual basis when a church member goes astray.

Meanwhile, I pray for all those affected, whether they attend the Lighthouse Church or not, and trust that God will watch over our community.

About the Author

Pamela Moore has lived in the U.S. for 55 years, the last 12 in La Grande. Now retired, she volunteered at the Grande Ronde Hospital Auxiliary and Next Step Pregnancy and Relationship Center.



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THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

(USPS 299-260)

Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, Oregon 97801. Published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except Dec. 25) by EO Media Group, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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