

Ranchers turn to bigger dogs to protect livestock

By KRISTIAN FODEN-VENCIL
Oregon Public Broadcasting

BAKER CITY — For the last few weeks, rancher Kim Kerns has been living in a 1970s trailer, up on a high meadow, with 550 sheep as they fatten up on spring grass.

Her family has used livestock protection dogs up here since the 1980s when she first got a Maremma guard dog from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

But that was before wolves returned.

“We’ve actually kind of changed the type and size of dog we use,” she said. “We’re using a bigger and more aggressive guard dog now than we did in the ‘80s and even the ‘90s.”

Now, her dogs are a mix of Akbash, Kangal and Anatolian, three massive, ancient breeds out of Turkey. All of them can be 100 pounds or more and have a bite pressure of 740 pounds per square inch. Statistics vary, but a wolf’s bite force is between 400 psi and 1,500 psi.

Kerns runs eight guard dogs at a cost of \$500 a month in feed. But she said the animals pay their ways by reducing the labor of controlling sheep and reducing predator kills.

Over the last couple of decades, Oregon and much of the West has been conducting an enormous ecological experiment by allowing wolves to once more roam the landscape.

For ranchers, wolves are another predator to guard against. But unlike coyotes, bears, bobcats or mountain lions, wolves hunt in packs and can be very persistent. They’re also smart. So they learn quickly that a sound cannon, a bunch of flags, or even gunfire into the air aren’t a real danger. And they return.

Kerns remembers a two-week period last year when wolves were picking off her sheep, one by one.



Shirley Shold greets her livestock protection dogs out on her ranch just east of Baker City.

Kristian Foden-Vencil/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Even her dogs weren’t a match.

“We weren’t getting any sleep, the guard dogs weren’t getting any sleep, everybody was run ragged,” she said. “And it was terrifying. Like it was flat scary.”

She tried everything, from spotlights and electrical fences at night, but the wolves kept coming.

“Finally we just decided that we couldn’t take it anymore. We moved the sheep a couple of miles,” she said. “It seemed to be outside of where the wolves were.”

Now, Kerns relies on the dogs to alert her to wolves. They can smell or see a wolf well before she can, and they start to bark and get agitated.

Kerns surrounds her sheep with a sturdy electric fence at night or moves them to another pas-

ture. She is permitted to shoot a wolf if it’s actively attacking. But since they’re federally protected, she needs really good proof. Also, shooting a wolf in a herd would just as likely result in the death of a sheep.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture has a compensation program to reimburse ranchers. But Kerns said it pays little and the loss of just one ewe can cause real damage, even though it might only fetch \$200 at market.

“There are some 5- or 6-year-old ewes in there that know every single camp we go to. Every single waterhole,” Kerns said. “That ewe is really irreplaceable in my flock.”

Kerns thinks the compensation program just gives the public permission to turn a

blind eye to the problem.

Unlike many ranchers, Kerns doesn’t want to see wolves eliminated again. But she’d like a quicker response from the government when she sends in a kill request.

Another rancher in the Baker City area, Shirley Shold, agrees: “I think it would be better for everyone, and the packs, if they were spread out more.”

She started breeding dogs that are suitable for herds after finding freshly killed calves and lambs.

“Seeing the loss of a newborn life was very hard,” said Shold, who moved from Portland 12 years ago.

“So I started thinking, we’ve got to do something different. And I was talking to a fellow rancher and

she said, ‘If you’ve got wolves, you want Kangal dogs.’”

So Shold got a Kangal and Akbash pair and now breeds them for other ranchers at about \$800 a head.

How good the dogs turn out to be depends largely on their nature, said Shold. Some dogs are more nurturing and remain in the middle of their herds. While other dogs become perimeter dogs, scouting outside the herd for predators.

Watching them is like watching a sheep dog trial. Except that instead of a human issuing orders, these dogs follow their inner natures.

But many traditional ranchers aren’t convinced the dogs can keep wolves away and, they point out, the dogs are expensive to feed.

But Shold thinks attitudes are changing as more wolves appear and ranchers see others in the business using large dogs to protect their livestock.

“Everybody started paying attention,” she said. “People really started ... watching the dogs because they can observe them from the highway, and I know it’s making an impact. They’re seeing that this can help.”

The dogs’ ability to manage a sheep herd is well recognized. But Shold wants to integrate them into cattle herds as well.

Others aren’t so sure. They point out that cows don’t herd together like sheep. That means the dogs have to patrol much larger areas. But on Shold’s ranch, the cattle do seem tolerant of the dogs.

Brian Ratliff, with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, said some ranchers are seeing success with the large dog breeds.

“Livestock protection dogs will work or have some noticeable benefits on certain operations. So, sheep and goats. Also in confined areas, smaller pastures, with cattle,” he said.

Spring chinook season opens late

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Anglers had to wait longer than they have in more than a decade, but they will again get the chance to hook a spring chinook salmon in the Snake River between Hells Canyon Dam and Dug Bar.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, which typically has opened the spring chinook season in late April, announced Tuesday, May 17, that the season had opened that day.

The issue this year is that few spring chinook are expected to arrive in that reach of the Snake River, said Kyle Bratcher, fish biologist at ODFW’s Enterprise office. But the story, and the problem that led to this situation, actually dates to 2018.

Not expecting a lot of fish

There was a meager return of spring chinook that year to the fish trap that Idaho Power Co. operates just below Hells Canyon Dam, Bratcher said.

Workers harvest eggs and sperm from those fish, and the eggs are reared at Idaho Power’s Rapid River hatchery near Riggins, Idaho. Two years later, when the juvenile fish are known

as smolts, workers release them so they can migrate downriver to the Pacific.

Most of the hatchery salmon make the return journey two years later, as 4-year-olds, Bratcher said. Each year’s run also includes fish 3 or 5 years old as well. The younger fish are known as “jacks.”

With so few adult spring chinook returning to the trap at Hells Canyon Dam in 2018, officials from the ODFW, the Idaho Fish and Game Department, in consultation with Native American tribes, decided not to release any spring chinook smolts below Hells Canyon Dam in 2020.

And that means that in 2022, the year when the majority of the surviving smolts, now 4-year-old adults, would return to the Snake, the number of hatchery spring chinook moving upriver from Dug Bar is projected to be low, Bratcher said.

“While we aren’t expecting a lot of fish, there is a healthy public interest in this fishery and we have decided to open so people can take advantage of that opportunity,” Bratcher said.

He said anglers are much more likely to catch jack salmon than adult fish this year.

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