Opinion

OUR VIEW

Stock dog killers deserve punishment

The Humane Society of the United States has put up a $5,000 reward for information that leads to the conviction of the person responsible for poisoning 14 stock dogs near Parma, Idaho.

We hope the reward will produce quick results and the perpetrators of these heinous crimes can be brought to the justice they deserve.

Since April, 14 stock dogs used by a Canyon County farmer to guard and shepherd sheep and goats have been poisoned. Twelve have died.

The dogs were intentionally poisoned with strychnine, said Dr. Brent Varriale, a Fruitland veterinarian who examined three of them. He said they had large amounts of green dyed grain in their stomachs, which is consistent with gopher bait that contains strychnine.

The gopher bait was mixed with a significant amount of raw ground meat and the amount of bait found in each dog would have required mixing it with food to encourage the dogs to eat as much of it as they did, he said.

We can't understand how anyone could intentionally poison a working dog. It makes no sense. Safe to say that the crimes have enraged the good people of Canyon County, and beyond.

Because the dogs cost between $1,500 and $2,500 each, it may be possible to charge a suspect with felonies.

Given the dogs died a particularly gruesome death, we're not sure those legal penalties will come close to providing justice. But since Idaho law no longer provides for public hangings, they will have to do.

OUR VIEW

Wolf regulations get reality check

The saga of reintroducing wolves into the Pacific Northwest appears to have entered a new chapter, as managers in Washington announced their revised guidelines for managing the predators.

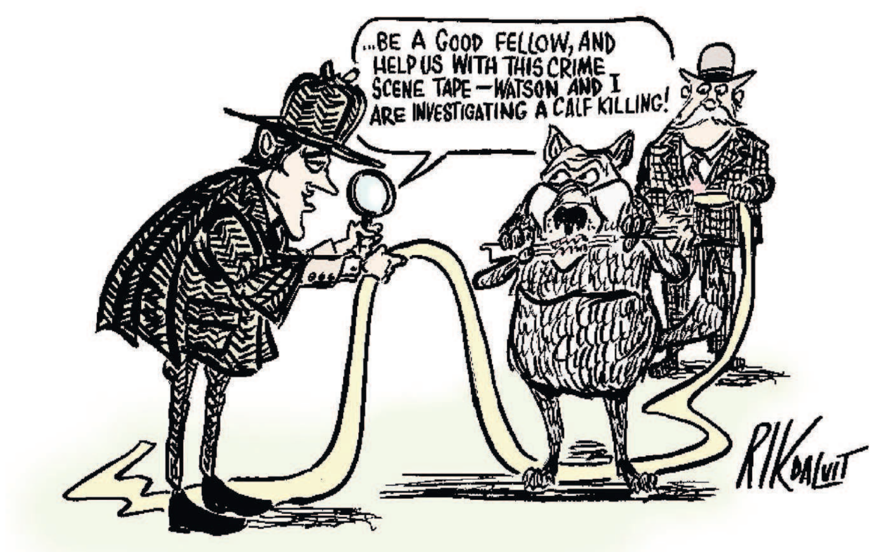
Formulated by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's Wolf Advisory Group, the guidelines appear to be realistic and much more workable than the department's first rules, which were neither.

The advisory group played a key role in developing the new regulations, and the participation of ranchers, conservationists and others shows in its work product. We have to acknowledge that the outcome appears to be better than we anticipated. Although the initial proclivity for secrecy and the steep pricetag of $800,000 caught our attention, it's good to see better rules emerge.

Wolves are back in the Northwest. In Idaho, where the first Canadian immigrants were dropped off in the mid-1990s, the wolves have long been past the point of needing protection.

In Oregon and Washington, where the wolves appeared within the past decade, the recent population growth curve has been steep, about 36 percent a year. At that rate, the population will nearly double every two years for the foreseeable future.

That growth means managers can switch gears from protecting wolves to managing them. Washington's new rules are similar to Oregon's rules, allowing for a set number of depredations before removing the



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

responsible wolves.

There are so many wolves that in some areas that a "wolf jam" appears to have developed. In northeastern Washington, for example, managers are having difficulty determining which wolves — or packs of wolves — are responsible for killing livestock. Two wolf packs overlap in the area of the attacks.

Washington's rules also call for state Fish and Wildlife Department people on the ground to work with ranchers to assess damage and determine what happened and how to avoid it from happening again. They have the ability to help ranchers figure out ways to keep hungry wolves at bay, which is the true value of having state managers anyway.

One quirk in Oregon's rules for managing wolves is the tendency for managers to say a dead lamb or cow is a "probable" wolf kill even though evidence points to wolves. For example, near Mud Creek in northeastern Oregon, a 150-pound calf was killed and partially eaten by a predator with large teeth, according to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. The calf was consumed in one night, another indication that it was killed by a wolf, yet the department called it a "probable" wolf kill.

When police investigate a murder scene, they try to put all of the evidence together and make some sort of conclusion about what happened. Not so with Oregon wildlife managers. They seem eager to just shrug their shoulders and say a wolf kill was "probable" unless the wolf is caught in the act.

As the wolf management rules become more realistic with the burgeoning wolf populations, we also hope investigations become more conclusive so problem wolves can be identified and addressed.

OUR VIEW

Diversity helps protect Western farmers

A report by Oregon's Office of Economic Analysis has encouraging words for Oregon's farm and food industries.

The quarterly economic and revenue forecast by Senior Economist Josh Lehner predicts strong performance by Oregon's agricultural segments and associated industries. Oregon's food processing and beverage manufacturing industries are expected to perform well over the next decade, and the state's crop production and nurseries will gain as well.

There's no question that some sectors of the state's diverse ag and food processing economies are booming. Craft beer, wine and now cider continue to gain popularity. After taking a drubbing during the recession, nurseries are seeing increased sales as the housing sector has improved. Fields in the Willamette Valley previously planted in wheat have been returned to grass seed.

All good news.

But at nearly the same time Lehner was presenting his report, the USDA's Farm Service Agency was reminding us that success in various segments in the ag economy is countercyclical — when some things are up, other things are down.

The agency says demand for its operating loans is outpacing available funds, partly due to lower farm incomes.

Funds for the agency's direct operating loans and guaranteed operating loans are likely to run out in this month, well ahead of the beginning of the next federal fiscal year in October when the loan fund will be replenished.

Dairy prices are below the cost of production. Wheat prices have been described as "uninspiring." Potato prices are sluggish, hay is lackluster.

But unlike the Midwest, where most every major commodity is in the dumper, the strength of agriculture in the Pacific Northwest is its diversity. All is not lost.

Opposing TPP: The half-truth and nothing else

By KEVIN KESTER
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
Kevin Kester

Last month 225 agricultural associations and companies sent a strong letter of support to congressional leaders calling for a vote in favor of the Trans-Pacific Partnership during 2016.

In the wake of this display of overwhelming agricultural support for TPP, some anti-trade groups attempted to follow suit with anti-TPP messaging that tried to paint the U.S. beef industry in a negative light regarding trade agreements.

In addition to ominous and misleading graphics, many of the statements were repackaged old arguments that have been refuted but would lead one to believe that trade agreements have created a massive trade deficit for the beef industry.

It is important that we understand and dismiss the half-truths they are telling the public.

As an attempt to downplay the upside of tariff removal and science-based standards that TPP will bring, TPP opponents claim the agreement will open the flood gates for beef imports to the U.S. and drive down cattle prices.

They also say the trade agreements are the major cause of the deficit.

Key factors

While it is true that we have trade agreements with three of our four largest import countries and the fourth country, New Zealand, is also TPP country, there are a few key factors that the TPP opponents conveniently fail to mention and several blatantly misleading statements being spread.

First, major beef import sources — Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico — for the U.S. market are TPP countries that already face low to no tariffs and large quotas. TPP will not remove any massive barriers to the U.S. market.

Canada and Mexico are already free to ship unlimited quantities of beef to the U.S. under NAFTA, and even with unrestricted access they are not are the largest import sources. Australia and New Zealand have been the largest import sources over the past few years, and yet they have high quotas and New Zealand faces a low tariff rate of 4 cents per kilogram.

The truth is, market demand already determines the volume of beef imports to the U.S. market, and TPP is not going to have a major impact in that regard.

Ground beef imports

Why do we import beef from these countries? If you listen to the TPP opponents it must be part of a global conspiracy to put U.S. beef producers out of business. But with the exception of Canada and Mexico, we don't import high-value muscle cuts from grain-finished beef that compete with our premium markets, and the volume of what we import from Canada and Mexico is not enough to displace domestic sales of U.S. beef.

The truth is, Americans love ground beef, and we import grass-finished beef from Australia and New Zealand to meet the demand for cheaper commercial ground beef. Frankly, we have developed higher-end cuts like the flat iron steak that yield greater return than ground beef, so we must import that same muscle from somewhere else to make up the shortfall. So why would packers want to put high-quality, high-value U.S. beef producers out of business? It doesn't add up.

Perfect storm

Back to the trade deficit argument. TPP opponents have conveniently failed to mention some of the key economic factors that led to the beef trade deficit in 2015.

Last year was tough for U.S. beef exports. We had seen a steady $5 billion increase in export sales from 2006 to 2014 only to drop off $800 million in 2015.

When you combine the strength of the U.S. dollar with commercial problems accessing Hong Kong, which had been a $1 billion market, the tremendous labor slowdown at West Coast ports, and the liquidation of the Australian beef herd due to drought (similar to what the U.S. industry faced in 2012-2013), you had a perfect storm with a direct hit on U.S. beef exports.

If it were not for access we had to other markets, especially markets with whom we have free trade agreements, the impact could have been much worse because we would not have had an outlet for our exports.

When all else fails, trade opponents say all of the profits are enjoyed by the packers and retailers with little to no benefit for producers. According to USDA's data, in 2015, exports accounted for nearly $325 per head in overall sales of finished steers and heifers. Those profits are shared throughout the production chain and are reflected in the overall value of cattle.

Until recently, we have enjoyed record prices for livestock and that has been a combination of limited supply and record demand, especially in foreign markets. It is hard to dismiss $325 per head.

Eliminating barriers

The truth is, trade agreements do not guarantee success and neither do protectionist high tariffs or other trade barriers. Trade agreements eliminate barriers so we have the freedom and ability to meet market demand for our goods when conditions are ripe.

These calls for protectionist market interventions may sound good on the political stage, but are dangerous and short-sighted ideas that turn our focus solely toward protecting the domestic market instead of capitalizing on the growing foreign consumer base.

If we listen to these siren calls and decide to focus exclusively on the U.S. consumer base, we will undercut our ability to compete for growing foreign demand from the 95 percent of consumers who live outside our borders and pay a premium for our product.

Unspoken message

Perhaps the most important message is what TPP opponents did not say. If we fail to take advantage of TPP, we will lose our greatest export market and fail to act on TPP will do nothing to stop beef imports from other countries.

Our leading competitor in the Japanese beef market is Australia. In January 2015 the Japan-Australia Trade Agreement took effect and gave our leading competitors a 10 percent tariff advantage over us in our leading export market. In other words, the Japanese tariff on U.S. beef is 38.5 percent and the Japanese tariff on Australian beef is less than 28 percent.

This disadvantage for U.S. beef resulted in nearly $300 million in lost sales in Japan in 2015. The tariff rate advantage for Australia will continue to grow for the next decade unless something is done to level the playing field.

The good news is TPP will level the playing field for U.S. beef in Japan by lowering the tariff rate on U.S. beef to match Australia's tariff rate upon implementation and will continue to decrease to 9 percent over 16 years. This the greatest beef market access ever negotiated into Japan — and that is the whole truth.

Kevin Kester is vice president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. He's a cattle producer from Parkfield, Calif.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

Letters policy: Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.