

Ranchers hit hard by wolves during spring grazing

By George Plaven
EO Media Group

A ranching couple in northeast Oregon says they are frustrated and heartbroken after struggling to protect their cattle from wolves earlier this spring.

Cassie Miller and her husband, John Petersen, graze several hundred mother cows and their calves on roughly 10,000 acres of spring pasture owned by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in the Blue Mountains east of Pendleton.

Most of Oregon's 158 documented wolves live in the state's northeast corner, including the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Despite camping out with the herd at night, hiring a range rider during the day and maintaining a human presence around the clock, Miller said they are 19 calves short after moving the livestock over to their summer range July 1.

Miller, a fifth-generation rancher from Union, said they have only been able to find six dead calves on the large allotment — a mix of grassy meadows and timber stringers. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife investigated each case, but could only confirm one of the calves was killed by wolves from the nearby Mount Emily pack on May 13.

Two others were ruled "probable" wolf attacks, and three were "possible/unknown," since most of the remains had already been eaten by scavengers.

While biologists did find evidence of wolves in the area — such as tracks, scat and coordinates for at least one wolf fitted with a GPS collar in February — they cannot know for sure what killed the livestock unless there is enough of the car-



Contributed photo/Cassie Miller
District biologists for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Pendleton investigated whether this calf was killed by wolves May 13 on tribal land in the Blue Mountains. The incident was later confirmed.

case left intact, leaving ranchers like Miller in a difficult position.

"Definitely, we should have had more confirmed depredations," she said. "That is why producers are getting so upset."

Miller said she does not blame local wildlife biologists or tribal land managers, but rather the criteria they must follow for confirming wolf kills.

"They're following the protocol lined out for them," Miller said. "They were empathetic. They said we definitely have a problem here."

Greg Rimbach, the district wildlife biologist for ODFW in Pendleton, said he sympathizes with ranchers who must spend more time and money hazing wolves, but believes the agency is doing the best it can with timely, evidence-based investigations.

"We go where the evidence leads

us," Rimbach said. "That has caused some concern or anguish with livestock producers. I don't blame them at all."

Except for one confirmed depredation, Rimbach said there was so little left of these calves they could not identify pre-mortem injuries. The Blue Mountains are ripe with predators and scavengers, from birds to bears and cougars. It does not take long before a carcass is mostly, if not entirely, consumed.

In 2017, Miller and Petersen received a five-year grazing permit from the tribes. Their allotment is divided into two sections on either side of a steep canyon, where the cows are rotated on an annual basis. The east side of the permit, which runs up to an area known as Telephone Ride, is where the couple has run into trouble.

Two years ago, they came out

ODFW INVESTIGATIONS

Northeast Oregon ranchers Cassie Miller and John Petersen found six dead calves this spring on their tribal grazing allotment in the Blue Mountains east of Pendleton. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife investigated each case for possible wolf depredation, and made the following rulings:

- April 30 — Probable
- May 2 — Probable
- May 12 — Possible/unknown
- May 13 — Confirmed
- May 24 — Possible/unknown
- May 26 — Possible/unknown

23 calves short. Miller said they did not realize the extent of the situation until it was already too late. This spring, they found their first two dead calves on back-to-back days, April 30 and May 1, and immediately got to work.

For three weeks straight, Miller said they camped out an average of five nights a week with the herd, firing gun blasts to scare away wolves. The tribes also hired a range rider to help patrol the ridge.

"We did a ton of hazing," Miller said. "We went into this with the intent of giving it 100%."

Yet Miller said despite their best efforts, the deaths did not stop. The couple found more dead calves on May 12, 13, 24 and 26. Miller said they may never find the other missing animals.

Gordy Schumacher, the range, agriculture and forestry program

manager for the tribes, acknowledged they need to come up with a better plan to mitigate wolf attacks on Telephone Ridge. He pondered additional non-lethal deterrents, such as fladry and flashing lights, though any proposal would need to be approved by the tribes' Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Oregon does allow for killing wolves that prey on livestock at least two times in nine months, defined as "chronic depredation." But Schumacher questioned whether killing wolves would only encourage other packs to move into the area, potentially making the situation worse.

"You've got to be real careful with how you do this," Schumacher said. "Once you have a group of coyotes or wolves you can live with, you leave them alone."

The tribes allowed Miller and Petersen to move their cattle to the west side of the allotment at the end of May, after which the problem seemed to stop. Miller said they have never had an issue on the west side of the permit.

Around the same time, Rimbach said OR-85, a male wolf collared by ODFW in February, abruptly left the area and wandered south near the John Day River.

"All of a sudden, we got no more indications from the livestock producer or the tribes that wolves were still there," he said.

Finding a solution is critical for Miller, who said the deaths of calves impact them both financially and emotionally.

"If you talk to ranchers, they're all going to tell you the absolute most horrific part of this is the feeling your animals have been put in this situation," she said. "They're important to us."

'Ominous' virus infection trends could reverse reopening

Governor extends emergency declaration to Sept. 4

By Gary A. Warner
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon's COVID-19 infection rate is rising so fast that, unless checked, businesses may have to close again and reopening schools this fall could be jeopardized, top state officials said July 1.

"Today, Oregon, you have a choice," Gov. Kate Brown said. "A choice only you can make. What happens next is up to you."

The press conference in Salem with Brown and top state health officials came a day after the governor had extended her emergency declaration for 60 days, to Sept. 4.

The governor and health experts underlined the need for public help in reducing infections.

Brown issued an order June 29 that face coverings or masks be worn by anyone over the age of 12 in all public indoor space.

In the 100 days since she issued her order for people to stay home, Brown said COVID-19 cases had grown from 14 to more than 8,900, killing 208 people in the state through July 1. The pandemic has killed 127,000 in the United States, while the death toll worldwide has raced past 500,000 since the virus appeared in China at the very end of 2019.

About 20% of the new cases in Oregon have come in two weeks in June, and the numbers continue an inexorable rise.

"We are on track to hit a worst-case scenario," said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top infectious disease expert.

New cases have been on the rise for five straight weeks.

But the worst may be yet to come.

Oregon could soon see 900 cases or more per day, according to state models. Daily hospital admissions could go from eight to 27 people per day.

If the current rate of spread increases exponentially, Oregon could see cases explode to 4,800 per day and 82 patients requiring hospital beds each day by the end of July.

"The trend is ominous," Sidelinger said.

Brown said decisions on keeping businesses open and sending children into classrooms this fall were at stake in coming days. The state began a phased "reopening" of businesses and allowing larger gatherings on May 15.

Any business that does not enforce the mask rule would face investigation and could lose its business licenses and face other sanctions. Brown said she did not want law enforcement involved in any disputes and asked businesses and customers to be courteous to each other and "de-escalate" any dispute.

Though the state's overall positive test rate of 4.3% is on the low end of the national scale, the virus is increasingly showing up in areas of Oregon that haven't been hit hard before.

"We are seeing the fastest case growth in Central and Eastern Oregon counties, such as Deschutes, Malheur, Umatilla," Sidelinger said.

The warnings in Oregon echoed those around the country as the coronavirus has spiked, especially in states such as Arizona, Texas and Florida that reopened businesses earlier than others.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, told Congress on June 30 that the country was "going

in the wrong direction" in the fight against COVID-19.

More than 43,000 new coronavirus cases were reported July 1 across the country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with Oregon and seven other states hitting single-day highs in infections.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom said COVID-19 has killed over 6,000 people in the state. Los Angeles County alone has recorded 100,000 cases. The state ordered 19

counties where infections are rising rapidly to close all bars, shutter the indoor portion of many businesses, close movie theaters and limit beach parking.

New York City will not allow indoor dining this week, as originally planned, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced. He cited the nationwide upward trend of cases of the virus that debilitated the city in the spring.

Oregon will begin reporting clusters of virus infection cases in child care facilities.

Willamette Week reported last week that a Lake Oswego child care center had eight children and 12 teachers testing positive.

Those younger than 50 are the fastest growing segment of the population to become infected with COVID-19. The death rate for those younger than 50 is less than 1%. However, they can spread the infection to more vulnerable populations.

The chances of death rise to 20% for those 75 and older. The New York Times reported

last week that long-term care homes have accounted for 55% of the pandemic deaths in Oregon. The national average was 43%.

Sidelinger said, no matter how low, each case has an impact.

"We all have to remember that the numbers I speak about are people, our fellow Oregonians," he said. "These are people who are sick, and tragically, some of them have died. These are people with families. These people are our neighbors."

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Hello Grant County,
Well, summer is finally here. I hope that makes you all feel a little better about things.

I think we all agree that our world has gone a little crazy and it makes it difficult to know what is going to happen tomorrow. Hang in there, things would be much worse if we didn't live in Grant County!

May and June are normally the months that we begin our election process here at the Chamber. But, due to not being able to have regular meetings, etc., we are a little behind schedule.

A nominating committee has been appointed. Our Bylaws state that names of candidates for Directors can be nominated by a petition bearing the signatures of at least five members in good standing. Petitions are available at the Chamber office. Letters of interest may also be submitted. Both of these must be received at the Chamber office no later than 4:00 PM July 15th.

Membership Due notices are being mailed also. If your business has been struggling due to closures please be sure to read the insert.

Our July meeting will be held at the Chamber office on Thursday July 16th at 10:30 PM.

The proposed budget will be presented to the Board for approval and an update on the new Grant County Logo will be given.

Take care everyone. Stay Well!
Tammy Bremner
Manager, Grant County Chamber of Commerce

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