



## AROUND THE REGION

# Running with the big dogs

Oregon ranchers turn to bigger guard animals to protect livestock from wolves

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. 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



Kristian Foden-Vencil/Oregon Public Broadcasting

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



Kristian Foden-Vencil/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Rancher Shirley Shold breeds Akbash Kangal dogs for ranchers who want bigger livestock protection animals, now that wolves are in Eastern Oregon.

sturdy electric fence at night or moves them to another pasture. 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 water-hole,” 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.

But it’s not about having the dogs fight the wolves.

“The most important thing I think that livestock protection dogs do ... is they alert the producer to what’s going on,” he said.

Back on the slopes of Kim Kerns’ ranch, she watches her dogs move the herd to greener pastures. She said yes, the dogs are useful: “They’re another tool in the tool box.”

But they’re not a silver bullet.

# Port lands \$2 million expansion grant

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

BOARDMAN — A unique rail-to-barge grain facility at Oregon’s Port of Morrow is expanding with help from a \$2 million grant recently approved by state transportation officials.

The Morrow County Grain Growers cooperative has won approval from the Oregon Transportation Commission for funding that will cover about two-thirds of the \$3 million project’s cost.

“It’s worked great so far and we hope it will give us that much more capability,” said Kevin Gray, the cooperative’s CEO, of the grain handling operation.

Originally completed in 2019, the facility is the only one of its kind along the Columbia River that can unload grain from rail cars and then load it into barges headed for downstream export elevators.

“It’s a time saver just because of the congestion on the railroads,” Gray said.

The expansion project will install a new 600,000-bushel grain bin and associated conveyors that will connect it to the existing facility.

Six grain bins already stood at the location when the cooperative built the \$7.5 million rail-to-barge system, whose cost included installation of a seventh bin.

The project recently approved for Connect Oregon grant funding will bring the number of bins to eight, with room for five more and a grain bunker left at the site.

Gray said the additional bin is meant to improve the facility’s flexibility, since until now it’s occasionally been forced to reject proposed grain loads because the existing bins were in use.

Even if the bins have storage capacity left, they’re still limited to storing the type of grain each one already contains, he said. “You can’t put corn in the same bin you put wheat in.”

Grain shippers benefit from using the facility because their loads can bypass backed-up rail traffic in Portland, Gray said.

By switching to a river barge, shippers can have their grain loaded into export elevators in Portland, Ore., and Vancouver, Wash., within 18 hours, versus a couple days with rail cars, he said.

“It’s a great way to get grain to access the Pacific Northwest export markets without having to get a train into Portland,” he said. “It gave them another path to their export elevator.”

Local grain farmers can also rely on the rail-to-barge facility, but its connection to two major railroads is primarily intended for loads from distant sources, such as Minnesota and North Dakota, Gray said.

Unlike some grain storage facilities, which are dedicated to grain from certain major traders, the cooperative’s bins can be used by any shipper, he said. “We’re not tied to any one grain company. We have flexibility.”

Grain grown in the central U.S. commonly reaches Asian markets by traveling via rail to export facilities along the Columbia River, where it’s picked up by ships headed across the Pacific Ocean, he said.

Another options is for the grain to be shipped to Gulf of Mexico export facilities, where it’s loaded onto ocean carriers that must first pass through the Panama Canal — a route that’s typically more expensive, Gray said.

The cooperative saw a surge in demand for its facility in 2020 after storms shut down export facilities along the Gulf of Mexico, he said.

Aside from serving as a transit point for Asian-bound grain, the facility is also useful for local dairies and feedlots, since it can import and store feed grains, Gray said. Shipping feed grains by rail is less expensive than trucking it into the area.

“This provides a way to meet the local livestock demand as well as help our customers save on transportation costs,” he said.

# Greater Idaho map shrinks

By JOE SIESS  
The Bulletin

BEND — The long-shot Greater Idaho movement reconfigured its map after two coastal and southern Oregon counties rejected ballot measures last week that would have required county commissioners to study becoming part of a different state.

While the setback does not spell the end for the Greater Idaho movement, which seeks to move the border of Idaho to include all of Eastern Oregon, it is a sign most of the people who hope to see the movement succeed are in rural counties east of the Cascades.

The likelihood the border would be changed is remote, as it would require the approval of both the Oregon and Idaho legislatures in addition to approval by Congress, but for the movement’s leaders, part of the point is to send a message to Salem and to get more rural Oregonians to the ballot box.

The movement’s new map now excludes Douglas, Coos, Curry, Josephine and Jackson counties, but includes nearly everything east of the Deschutes River. The Bend area would remain in Oregon, but other parts of Deschutes, Jefferson, and Wasco counties would be annexed to Idaho. Most of Klamath County, which in Tuesday’s election became the ninth county to support the movement, would be annexed as well. Jefferson County narrowly



Submitted Image

A redrawn map by the Greater Idaho movement.

approved the Greater Idaho ballot measure in 2020. It asked county residents if they wanted the Jefferson County Commission to meet twice a year to discuss the initiative.

Kelly Simmelink, a Jefferson County commissioner, said while he is willing to do what he can to honor the people’s vote, he does not have high hopes for the movement’s success.

“I applaud the efforts of people that want to be represented,” Simmelink said. “I get it. Eastern Oregon, anything east of the Cascades, has a long record of being underrepresented.”

“We need to make Oregon work for all of us ... I want my Oregon to

be the best it can be. The state is run in a fashion that it is one size fits all, and what works in Multnomah County doesn’t work in Jefferson...”

Mike McCarter, president of the Greater Idaho effort, said the movement intends to push forward, and the main goal at this point is to start the conversation in the state Legislature.

“We are working hard trying to find the champions in the state Legislature that want to start the discussion,” McCarter said. “I think that what we are doing does send a message to the Oregon Legislature that they need to work across the state.”

McCarter said the movement’s intention from the beginning was

never to force an issue on anybody, but getting it on the ballot was an important step in figuring out where the focus should be moving forward.

“Our move right now, we have ready to turn in the signatures for Morrow County, to get them on the ballot in November,” McCarter said. “And we have signatures lined up to put Wallowa County on next May’s election. And we are trying to work with Wheeler and Gilliam counties to get them a petition going so we can get them on the ballot.”

“So, we are going to continue on. This is not a step back. It’s maybe a change of direction a little more,” he added.