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Coyote bounty program flawed, naturalists say



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By Allison Werbowetsky
Saskatchewan

There is no question coyotes have caused problems on ranches throughout the province for years. Reports of these widespread predators attacking and killing livestock, sheep, dogs and horses have flooded the government's phonelines, and some families have even feared for the safety of their children.

This past November, Minister of Agriculture Bob Bjornerud put the Saskatchewan Coyote Control Program into action, a province-wide bounty in hopes to control the overwhelming coyote population.

"This is the only thing really that we felt would keep the numbers down and try to put a little fear in the coyotes again," Bjornerud said.

The pilot project will run until March 31, at which point its progress will be assessed and it may be extended if necessary. As of Feb. 19, the program had received a total of 18,000 coyotes.

However, William Gibbs, a teacher and member of the Naturalist Society, raised concern about a pack of coyotes unnecessarily killed in a more rural area along the Swift Current Creek not too long ago. These particular coyotes had white coats and were said be the product of a domestic dog and coyote cross.

"It was unusual and unique, and people liked seeing it around. There was no evidence at all that it was taking livestock or being a predator in that sense. There was no real justification in killing them," Gibbs said.

The owners of the land where the coyotes were usually spotted, who are also naturalists and preferred not to take part in this article, never found them to be a threat and even attempted to protect them from hunters.

"It brings into question this whole policy that Bjornerud has brought forward," Gibbs continued. "I don't have a problem with hunting, I have a problem with this particular approach to it. This is not hunting, this is bounty hunting. He's gone too far."

Livestock losses, he suggests, are the result of poor fencing, not a coyote problem. Gibbs' solution is the government redirect its funding to instead help

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ranchers build and pay for adequate fencing around their properties.

“Livestock operators have to take more responsibility for managing their herds. They have to use proper fencing and other strategies if they’ve got livestock. That’s the long-term way of dealing with this problem,” he said.

“There are many combinations of fencing and other proven strategies that can be incorporated to minimize their losses. That’s what the government should be doing,” he added.

Doug Gillespie, a long-time rancher in the Neville area just outside of Swift Current, was a little surprised when he heard the suggestion.

“I’ve never heard of fencing the coyotes out,” he said, chuckling slightly. “I don’t have a very big place but you’re still looking at 14 or 15 miles of fence. It’s absolutely not practical.”

However, Gillespie did agree with Gibbs that killing coyotes posing no threat to livestock is unnecessary. “Indiscriminate killing of the ones that aren’t causing a problem I think is needless. They do a lot of good, they kill a lot of gophers and control the deer,” Gillespie said.

“I think where there’s a problem they should deal with it, but where there isn’t a problem they should be basically left alone,” he added.

Unfortunately, a bounty hunt such as this which targets all coyotes is difficult to control.

“Really, how do you pick out the ones causing the problems?” Bjornerud questioned. “A coyote’s a coyote when it’s causing problems and killing your livestock.”

The program attracted 241 of the 296 RMs in Saskatchewan to take part, which is proof in itself people all across the province are noticing the problem.

“We’re not going to eradicate them by any means,” he said. The program’s goal of 36,000 is only a small percentage of the approximated 200,000 to 300,000 coyotes still living throughout the province. As for Gibbs’ fencing idea, Bjornerud says it’s not a practical solution.

“In a perfect world it would be nice to have all of our yards perfectly fenced. The problem is our cattle and sheep aren’t just in our yards, they’re in our pastures,” Bjornerud commented. “A number of the ranchers out there have thousands upon thousands of acres, there’s no way on earth you could have it all fenced to keep coyotes out.”

However, Gibbs remains concerned about the messages this kind of bounty program sends out to children. “What are we teaching our next generation about the environment?” he asked.

(Comments? E-mail: awerbowetsky@prairiepost.com)

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