Bounties on wolves and coyotes slammed as 'inhumane' by Alberta biologists

Research paper concludes bounties do more harm than good

By Terry Reith, Briar Stewart, CBC News Posted: Nov 05, 2015 1:32 PM MT | Last Updated: Nov 05, 2015 2:10 PM MT

Wolf and coyote bounties lead to the killing of established populations, which opens territory to transient animals, researchers say. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service/Associated Press)

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Two Alberta-based wildlife biologists are calling for an end to bounties offered on wolves and coyotes, calling them "inhumane" and ineffective.

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In a research paper published in the journal Animals, authors Gilbert Proulx and Dwight Rodtka, both former biologists with the Alberta government, say paying bounties for killing wolves and coyotes does far more harm than good.

Bounties are common in Alberta and Saskatchewan where the predators are known to target cattle and sheep. In Alberta alone, the cost to ranchers is estimated at more than $2 million per year, according to research commissioned by the Alberta Beef Producers.

Proulx said he takes no issue with killing problem predators that are threatening livestock, but he believes bounties are the wrong way to go about it.

"There are predators that need to be removed. We're not against the killing of predators."

Gilbert Proulx is co-author of a research paper that says bounties on wolves and coyotes should be banned. (Terry Reith/CBC)

Bounties now offered on smaller scale

All provincial bounty programs were ended four decades ago, but counties, municipal districts and other organizations have been offering them since 2007.

In the past five years, more than 1,400 wolves and 25,000 coyotes were killed under bounty programs in 16 Alberta counties, according to the study's authors. But Proulx noted those figures are likely low, as he was unable to get data from many of the organizations paying the bounties.

In most cases, hunters and landowners are paid around $15 per coyote and up to $500 per wolf.

"The problem with those type of activities and the bounties is that they

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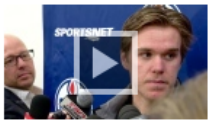

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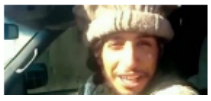

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kill established and structured coyote populations," Proulx said. "By doing so, they open the land to transient animals that can come in, are not well established, they look for food and they go and kill more calves and more sheep."

But rancher Jack Gilberg said there is value in the bounties, especially when it comes to coyotes.

Jack Gilberg credits bounty programs with keeping wolf and coyote numbers on his cattle ranch in check. (Terry Reith/CBC)

A pile of bones

Gilberg has a herd of about 500 beef cattle, and a smaller herd of longhorns, on his sprawling Stone Cup Ranch in Two Hills County, Alta. He loses about six animals per year to predators.

"I appreciate the bounty," he said. "I appreciate that the county does it, because it keeps a little bit of a lid on the coyotes, because they will just explode, they will just keep going."

One year before the bounty was offered, Gilberg snared and killed 77 coyotes on his property. In 2012, he collected $15 each for four wolves that were stalking his cattle.

"We heard them howling," he recalled. "It was in the evening and we heard the wolves howling. At first, 'Wow, those are wolves, that's so cool' and then we realize 'Gee, we just moved a herd of heifers in there.' There were 101 heifers."

Two days later, he was down one heifer. All that remained of the cow was a pile of bones, which wildlife officials identified as a wolf kill.

Gilberg said lone wolves still visit his property, but the main pack moved on after the dominant female and other members were killed.

He said he'll never be rid of coyotes.

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"You will never take out the coyote. It's really a unique, cool animal in their way, but they are too smart — you would just never clean them out."

Predators cost ranchers $2 million per year, estimates the Alberta Beef Producers. (Terry Reith/CBC)

Leave it to experts, says researcher

In nearby St. Paul County, Alta., officials agree that coyotes will always be a problem, but say the bounty has reduced their numbers at a key time of year: calving season, when young cattle are most vulnerable.

"That's kind of what we're aiming for," said agricultural fieldman Keith Kornelsen. "From February to May, it seems to reduce the population for that time."

Since 2010, St. Paul County has paid out bounties on 60 wolves, and since 2013, on 7,500 coyotes. The county also provides poison to landowners who are having predator problems, a controversial practice for some.

Keith Kornelsen, an agricultural fieldman in St. Paul County, Alta., says he has not heard any complaints about the bounty program from area residents. (Terry Reith/CBC)

"The idea is it will kill the coyotes coming into the farm yard. You know, usually it's those sickly ones, and so kill a few of those," Kornelsen said.

The amount of poison handed out has gone down in the past few years, he added.

Proulx and Rodtka's research paper takes specific aim at the use of strychnine, calling it a contravention of all professional animal welfare guidelines. They say it is an inhumane method of killing, which can lead to the unintentional and painful death of animals other than the ones targeted.

"It's a bit of a domino effect, you kill one animal, which gets eaten by another animal and so on, and you end up creating a poor wildlife community," Proulx said.

Their research draws the conclusion that bounties are ineffective and should be made illegal. Predator control, they said, should be left to the experts.

"We're the professionals. We will take care of it. If an animal causes a problem, we can send a wildlife control specialist, hire a local trapper and remove the culprit."

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