

## Why Livestock Farmers Are Worried And Anxious About Wolves

Wolves are an important part of our ecosystem in northern Minnesota. Northern Minnesota has an ideal habitat for wolves. Unfortunately, their populations had been significantly reduced in prior years (mid-1960s) due to [human persecution, habitat deterioration and prey reduction](#). Wolf populations were extremely and dangerously low. In 1966, the wolf was listed on the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which resulted in an expanding wolf population. Currently, because the wolf is on the Endangered Species List, the only way a wolf can be killed is to protect human life.

### Current State of the Wolf Population

No one is questioning the decision to put the wolf on the Endangered Species List in the 1960s. But what is the current wolf population in Minnesota? Right now, the gray wolf population is estimated at 1 for every 10 square miles. Only Alaska has a higher wolf density.

### Federal Guidelines for Delisting the Wolf--Is it Time?

The federal guidelines for delisting is a [wolf population of 1200-1400](#). In 2013, the wolf population in Minnesota was estimated at 2200. So based on the federal guidelines, the wolf was delisted in 2012 to 2014.

Nathan Nelson, a farmer near Hinkley, explains the history of the government wolf intervention:

As a result of a successful re-establishment effort, the gray wolf exceeded the target population goals and in 2011 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service returned management of the wolves to individual states. Then the MN Department of Natural Resources (DNR) established a hunting season. The first hunting season was held the fall of 2012, a second season the fall of 2013 and the 2014 season was cut short December 19 by U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell in ruling that returned the gray wolf to protection under the Endangered Species Act

John Chute, a cattle farmer from central Minnesota, reports on his experience during 2012-2014 when the wolf was delisted:

On a personal observation over the years, we saw a change in wolf/livestock interaction after the state management of 2012–2014. Although the total wolf numbers changed minimally, the “wild, fear of man” was back in the wolf and lasted a couple of years. Sadly, without regular reminders, they forget and frequently visited my calving area looking for a

free lunch!

## **The stories we need to hear**

Raising livestock and an expanding wolf population in northern Minnesota are not compatible. Wolves can and do thrive in different habitats. With the expanding population, they are [spreading out of their original habitat areas](#). Also, wolves don't differentiate their prey.

Here are a few stories of how wolves affect farmers.

Nelson reports,

On our farm, we have lost several animals to wolf depredation. There have been three calves that were “officially” confirmed to be wolf killed by our conservation officer. There are five or six more animals that I believe I have lost to wolves, however, to be confirmed as a wolf kill there needs to be evidence of depredation. In all the unconfirmed cases I have found wolf sign, such as tracks or have seen wolves in the area, however I was not able to locate the carcass or any part thereof of one of my animals. I have shown the conservation officer wolf scat (that is what the feces of a wolf is called) that was full of red hair, bits of hide and bone fragments, only to have them tell me that “it is almost certainly a Red Angus calf, but without the carcass of the calf I can't confirm it.

Nelson continues,

We have both dairy and beef cattle. Most of the cows give birth to their calves in a pasture close to our house. This calf had been born about an hour before it was preyed upon. I had checked on the mother and baby and all were doing well. I had left them alone, yet they were still in my sight while I finished feeding the rest of the cattle. I was about 300 feet away from the cow and calf when I saw a horrific sight, a timber wolf was attacking the calf and its mother was frantically trying to protect it. I was able to scare the wolf away by hollering and making a lot of noise, however noise and human presence doesn't always scare away hungry wolves. The calf didn't appear to sustain very many injuries, however, it later died from an infection as a result of the attack despite the care given under the direction of our veterinarian. This is just one of several stories from our farm. We strive for the health, safety and care of our animals, however, the actions of predators can be very unpredictable.

Sarah and Miles Kuschel live in Cass County, which is half way between Duluth and Fargo. They, too, have experienced dead livestock due to wolf attacks.

We have been impacted by wolves on our ranch. Everything from the cattle being harassed by wolf packs, them killing calves and during times they will hamstring full grown cows (I had no idea what yhid meant but to hamstring a cow means a wolf takes ahold of the back end of the cow and rip out the rump upper leg muscles and tendons and then just leave the cow unable to get up. Usually she is still alive and would be left to suffer. This is seen the most in the fall when they are teaching the pups to hunt). Yes, a little graphic.

Chute also responds:

25 – 40 years ago it was very rare to see a gray wolf in our area as most wolves were in areas with less human populated areas in far north/northeastern Minnesota. Today the wolf population has flourished under protection. Wolf packs have naturally needed to spread out and cover much more area to find adequate food to feed the larger wolf numbers. Extreme protections have allowed the wolf to become fearless of human activities adapting to areas of easy prey (food source) thus frequently looking for “lunch” in livestock pastures, pens and farmyards. The wolf range currently covers much of the area north of I-94.

Farmers are compensated with indemnity payments from the government. The government will pay (market price) farmers for their livestock losses. The problem with the program is sometimes the state money runs out of money or farmers don't know when they will receive their payments, which makes it difficult to run a farming business. Also, the indemnity program does not compensate farmers for livestock where the wolf has devoured the entire animal. The program requires livestock remains in order to be compensated. Another issue the indemnity program does not take into consideration the harassment from wolves (cattle are often times rattled when wolves are near), which can and does affect reproduction. It's estimated that only 10-33% of livestock deaths from wolves are compensated.

The other issue that causes concern is the apparent lack of fear of humans. Again, Nelson states,

The first animal on our farm that was confirmed to be a wolf kill happened 200 feet from my house, the wolf then walked between the house and the barn, continuing down the road through our fields. The gray wolves have no predators and the have learned there is nothing to fear.

Enough to make anyone shudder.

## Why the increase in wolf attacks on livestock?

There are multiple reasons for this.

- The wolf population is increasing.
- They adapt to their surroundings which are forcing them into more agricultural areas.
- Lack of wildlife prey due to low healthy deer numbers.

Nelson also responds,

Another issue is the MN DNR had a very aggressive deer harvest allowances in this area for too long. The whitetail deer is a natural food source for wolves and combined with an

aggressive hunt and two back to back harsh winters (2013 and 2014) the deer population plummeted. The wolves then fed more heavily on the cattle herds in the area.

## **Are there other methods to deter wolf attacks?**

The Kuschels respond,

"We have tried every method available to us and once the wolves have a taste for beef the only ones that work are lethal methods. Giving farmers and ranchers the ability to protect their livestock helps keep the wolves population in check which in turn keeps them more closely to their natural habitat and food sources."

## **Is it time to delist the wolf and what will happen to the wolf population?**

Yes.

Some are concerned about the results of delisting the wolf. The state of Minnesota is well aware of this. They passed a [wolf management bill in 2000](#) allowing the DNR to monitor and manage the wolf populations and allowing farmers more freedom to protect their livestock from wolf depredation. Minnesota's management plan requires a minimum of wolf population of 1600 to ensure long-time survival. In my opinion, this plan sounds very reasonable.

## **Are there opposing views?**

Yes. There are activist groups who do not want the wolf delisted. I think it's important to note that the view from farmers and the state of Minnesota is not to eliminate the wolf but to manage it. According to Mark Liebart, Wisconsin's Farmers Union director,

"We need to educate save-the-wolf activists about the fallout from an unrealistic wolf management program," Northern farms produce organic, grass-fed beef and poultry for the urban population's beef needs. Predator control is needed for these family farms to survive. They are jeopardizing their meat supply."

"When I address these wolf activists," Liebart continued, "I say to them: you may love the

wolves but don't we as farmers have the right to love our cattle and protect them. Our livelihood and way of life can be destroyed without a realistic wolf management program.”

The bottom line is many of the activists are many times also customers of grass-fed beef. Think about it. They want to save all the wolves, who are the very species killing the grass-fed beef. You can't have it both ways.

*It should be about reasonableness and balance for all.*

## **Where do we go from here?**

It is time the federal government delist the wolf from the Endangered Species List and transfer the control and monitoring back to the states. No one wants to go back to the levels of the 1960s and 1970 but the pendulum has now swung too far the other way. Farmers need to be able to protect their livestock and we need a long-term survival plan for the gray wolf. And this is doable. Farmers and the government entities can work together to accomplish this goal. Let's just do it.

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