

Predator control fails to help sheep industry

Wildlife Conservation Society
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Decades of U.S. government-subsidized predator control has failed to prevent a long-term decline in the sheep industry, according to a study by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), which says that market forces – not predators – are responsible for the drop-off in sheep numbers.

The study, which appears in the latest issue of the journal *Conservation Biology*, says that more than 80 years of federally subsidized predator control with a total investment of more than 1.6 billion dollars have not been able to stave off an 85 percent decline in the sheep industry since its peak of 56.2 million animals in 1942.

According to the study, predation by coyotes is often cited as the primary cause of the decline. However, 80 years of historical data reveal that a variety of market trends ranging from fluctuating hay prices and rising wages for livestock workers, to the drop in wholesale prices of lamb and wool, are the real culprits behind the industry's drop-off.

As evidence, the study points to a 141-percent increase in wages, 23 percent decrease in lamb prices, and 82 percent decrease in wool prices during the period in which sheep numbers were reduced by 85 percent. "This is an industry whose profitability has been squeezed from both sides," said WCS research scientist Kim Berger, the lead author of the study.

"If predation losses are responsible for the decline in the U.S. sheep industry and federal predator control has been effective at reducing these losses, then we'd expect to see a strong, positive relationship between efforts to control predators and trends in sheep numbers and that is just not the case," said Berger.

Berger notes that while predation is not the industry's primary threat, it is one of the few factors over which ranchers feel they have some degree of control, and this can lead to intense pressure on wildlife managers to reduce predator numbers. In 1998 alone, federal agents killed more than 268,000 large carnivores, according to WCS. Although coyotes account for 75-to-95 percent of carnivores killed

annually, mountain lions, bobcats, wolves, black bears and grizzly bears are also removed. The perception of carnivores as widespread livestock killers represents a major challenge to their conservation worldwide.

Berger suggests that federal funding for predator control in the sheep industry should be re-evaluated given the program's failure to prevent the industry's decline. "That the decline of the sheep industry is closely associated with unfavorable market conditions rather than predation losses raises serious doubts about the value of continued efforts to control carnivores," Berger said.