

# Wildlife Conflict Resolution Program

## Program Overview

The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has been working in the Yellowstone Ecosystem since 2002 on a Wildlife Conflict Resolution Program to retire livestock grazing allotments that experience chronic conflict with wildlife, especially grizzly bears and wolves. In 2009 NWF expanded this program to the 1.1 million-acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) in north-central Montana. Ranchers receive fair payment for retiring their allotments, and typically use these funds to secure grazing in locations without wildlife conflicts.

To date NWF, along with our partners, has retired 34 allotments totaling more than 612,000 acres in the Yellowstone Ecosystem. In the CMR, we've retired 5 allotments for more than 59,000 acres.

We believe by using a fair market approach to change grazing patterns, we can turn opponents into partners and provide a positive win-win solution for both ranchers and wildlife. We also believe our grazing retirement approach can provide a new conservation model for other species ... one that reduces litigation, while sustaining the ranching industry and protecting America's wildlife heritage.

## Yellowstone Ecosystem Project Description

### Introduction

Wolf and grizzly bear populations are faring well in Yellowstone National Park and adjacent wilderness areas that comprise their primary range in the Yellowstone Ecosystem. But once large carnivores leave these protected areas, death rates rise dramatically. Conflict with domestic livestock is one of the leading sources of mortality.

When federal agencies created public land grazing allotments more than a century ago, they were permitted almost anywhere grass was available. But as conservation on public lands evolved, the need to weigh and balance competing uses increased. This became more acute as Congress passed new laws dealing with multiple-use, conservation of watersheds, and protection of endangered species.

In situations where conflicts between livestock and wildlife are prolonged and intractable, NWF believes that grazing retirements represent an equitable solution for livestock and wildlife interests.

### Understanding Both Sides

Conflicts between livestock and wildlife on public lands have been ongoing for several decades. The tactic favored by many environmental groups has been to try and compel federal agencies to administratively cancel troublesome leases. This has generated a great deal of controversy, but only a small amount of change.

We believe the approach fails because it doesn't recognize that grazing leases have economic value. Ranchers frequently sell these permits to one another, and banks even loan money based on their value. So it's understandable why taking away a lease without compensation causes so much controversy and ill will.

NWF does not seek to remove all livestock grazing from public lands. We are only concerned about allotments that have prolonged and seemingly irresolvable conflicts with wildlife. Typically such situations make it difficult for a producer to profitably run livestock, so it's not surprising that permittees who graze "conflict" allotments are willing to consider retirement. In exchange for retirement, NWF provides the producer with a payment that is sufficient to procure new grazing of equal or higher quality, in an area without similar conflicts.

A market approach to changing grazing patterns can turn opponents into partners and provide a positive solution to chronic conflicts between livestock and large carnivores. We believe this grazing retirement approach can provide a new conservation model that reduces litigation, sustains agriculture, and reconfigures grazing to locations where it is compatible and sustainable.

### Details of the Program

Our first step was to establish priorities for livestock grazing retirements. We asked leading scientists, wildlife managers, and conservation experts in the region how to do that. These experts suggested:

1. that our retirements should be proximate to core recovery areas or to key wildlife corridors;
2. that retirement of sheep allotments should be a higher priority than retirement of cattle allotments because they



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3. create more conflict with wildlife;
3. that we analyze the configuration of grazing allotments and give preference to retirements that create large areas without livestock; and
4. that we carefully evaluate which allotments have experienced the greatest number and frequency of livestock losses. These same experts also identified specific allotments where they thought grazing retirements would be most beneficial.

The normal procedure when wolves or grizzlies kill livestock on public lands is for agencies to either move or kill the offending predators. Because many of these allotments are in remote locations, control actions typically require horses or aircraft. Producers who experience verified losses to wolves and grizzlies are compensated through state or private programs. These control and compensation efforts can be extremely costly, frequently costing in a single year ten or twenty times more than the producer pays in grazing fees.

But more important from a conservation standpoint, the continued removal of grizzly bears and wolves due to livestock conflicts hampers their ability to expand their range or increase their numbers.

### The Process

Agreements to retire grazing allotments are strictly voluntary. NWF contacts ranchers who hold leases on allotments that are on our priority list for retirement. If the rancher is interested, we negotiate a price.

We base the value for retiring the allotment on the amount of forage available on the allotment. Since ranchers routinely buy and sell grazing allotments, a market has been created. NWF typically pays a small premium over the price ranchers sell allotments to each other.

Once we have an agreement with the rancher, we approach the land management agency (the U.S. Forest Service for all of NWF's retirements) and make sure it is willing to permanently close the allotment if the rancher gives up the permit. This is simplified when agencies have direction in their forest plans to retire grazing allotments with chronic conflicts. The national forests in the Yellowstone ecosystem all have the latitude to utilize grazing retirements in situations where there are chronic conflicts between grizzly bears and livestock.

Grazing retirements typically are finalized with a three-way transaction:

1. the rancher waives his grazing permit back to the Forest Service without preference to another producer;
2. the Forest Service writes a decision letter permanently closing the allotment; and
3. NWF provides the rancher with a check.

### Summary

In coordination with federal land managers, NWF negotiates with livestock producers to retire livestock grazing allotments on public lands that experience chronic conflict with wildlife, especially wolves and grizzly bears. This market approach recognizes the economic value of livestock grazing permits and fairly compensates producers for retiring their leases. It also addresses the economic imbalance that exists because wildlife conservation interests are not allowed to compete with livestock producers for grazing leases on public lands. This approach establishes an important new national model for resolving conflicts between livestock and wildlife.

