



Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association
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Media Release

Tackling the Wildlife Control Issue

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Guelph, ONT Wildlife-induced damage to agricultural commodities continues to be an issue with Ontario farmers. Some are affected in a chronic low-level sort of way. Others suffer severe financial losses, depending on their farm's proximity to wildlife habitat or attractiveness to wildlife as an easy food source.

With this in mind, the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) established three demonstration sites in 2002 to test several measures for mitigating wildlife-caused losses. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Agricultural Environmental Stewardship Initiative (AESI), administered in Ontario by the Agricultural Adaptation Council and the Ontario Farm Environmental Coalition, has provided some of the financial assistance for the two-year initiative.

Mark Ritchie and Cherry Allen, sheep producers on Amherst Island near Kingston, are hosts to one of these demonstration sites. They have had reasonably good success deterring coyote predation with guard dogs. But this past spring with help from the AESI project, they constructed a 60-acre "safe" area using predator-proof fencing as an extra tool in their arsenal to protect their flock, especially during lambing and weaning.

So far the "safe" area has proven to be just that. They've had an uneventful season with no coyote sightings or kills inside the safe area, although there were four kills in June and July outside. The removal of a number of coyotes last winter by local hunters, trappers and neighbouring producers likely also helped reduce losses. This will no doubt as well have a significant impact on the Island's coyote population, possibly lengthening the safe area's "honeymoon" period, a time associated with each new coyote control effort.

But extra measures come with a cost. And these costs are over and above those generally associated with basic farming needs. Itemizing these costs, in addition to learning new techniques and sharing information, is of keen interest to the project partners.

Mark notes, "Fencing's like anything – you get what you pay for, and the cheaper options have their disadvantages. We normally use two basic types of boundary fence – an electric fence on rented land and a page wire fence on land we own." Both designs do a good job of keeping sheep in. However, neither design keeps coyotes out of pastures – hence the need for predator-proof fencing.

"The permanent page wire boundary fence has a lifetime of probably 40 years and requires much less maintenance than the basic electric fence which should last about 15 years. We use 39" high

page wire – 12-inches between the verticals – with a high tensile 12.5 gauge wire at the bottom and one above to bring the height to 48.” Six-foot T-posts are spaced at 5-yd intervals. Costs on this fence are \$1.45/ft or 3.62 cents/ft/yr over its life span.

The predator-proof fencing on the safe area consists of 4-ft high small-mesh page wire – 6 inches between the verticals. This is topped by a live wire 9 inches above the page and another dead wire 9 inches above that for a total height of 5½-ft, too high for coyotes to jump over. The wire is set on steel posts, 2½ ft in the ground, 20% of which are drilled into Amherst Island’s rock where the soil is too shallow. It’s set close to the ground with an additional high tensile wire woven along the bottom edge to keep it taught. Any remaining gaps are blocked to keep coyotes from crawling under. The heavy clay soils discourage digging.

Two panels, each constructed of chain link fence on a galvanized frame measuring 8 feet wide by 6 feet high, close each of the five gateways. Total costs for materials, including labour, equalled \$2.37 per foot or 5.92 cents/ft/yr over its 40-year life. The total length of fence installed around the perimeter of the safe area is about 6500 feet.

Fencing is mainly a one-time cost. Guard dogs, on the other hand, present regular and substantial annual maintenance costs.

To protect 1000 ewes and their lambs, Mark and Cherry mobilize a kennel of 8 Great Pyrenees – an average of 125 ewes and their lambs per dog. Their sole purpose is to protect the flocks. A trained mature guard dog may be worth \$500-\$1000 depending on age and ability. A guard dog puppy of 8-10 weeks old could sell for \$350.

“In 2002 we spent \$425 per dog on feed. Including veterinary costs, annual average costs per dog total \$647. Assuming one dog protects 125 ewes and their lambs, guard dog cost per ewe per year is \$5.18,” Cherry advises.

The incremental cost of the safe area, over and above costs associated with a basic page wire fence, was almost \$6000. The annual cost of 8 guard dogs is just over \$5000.

All this begs the question, “Who should pay?” Should the responsibility lie solely with the producer, or is some form of publicly funded cost-share program for wildlife damage prevention appropriate? And what is preferable...paying the cost of prevention or paying the cost of losses?

The Ontario sheep industry currently benefits from a wildlife damage compensation program for kills attributed to coyotes, wolves or dogs, but producers criticize the package for being out-dated, under-funded and far too restrictive.

OSCIA’s “Wildlife Impact Assessment for Ontario Agriculture” (March 2000) dealt specifically with this growing issue. Recommendations favoured risk management options to prevent losses. However compensation mechanisms were recognized as essential where legislation restricts a farmer’s ability to prevent losses or where preventative efforts are ineffective.

So...“Who should pay?” From a producer’s viewpoint, Mark and Cherry note, “This is a matter for producers as a whole to comment on. Other relevant questions include size of the flock, acres grazed, average annual losses, preventative measures taken, how much producers are prepared to spend for protection on a per ewe basis, and how much they feel society could contribute on a per ewe basis. A per ewe basis allows us to put the cost in perspective with other health and production costs.”

Tackling the costs of wildlife control is not a simple one-step process. At the recent Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency (OSMA) annual meeting, Andrew Graham, Stewardship Programs Co-ordinator for OSCIA, addressed the wildlife control issue. He suggested a path with four ways to effect change – education, technological innovation, legislation and cost-share. How effectively these four are blended and who delivers them need careful consideration.

Education is essential to inform farmers of existing options for wildlife control. It may involve changes in farming practices or measures to exclude wildlife from crops. Education helps consumers understand the difficulties farmers' face in producing their crops and raising livestock.

Technological innovation, such as the projects in the AESI program, test innovative theories and offer new ideas for effecting wildlife control. Since initial costs are generally higher than untried methods, public funding is of great assistance in developing these options.

Legislation provides options for controlling wildlife populations, either through regular hunting and trapping seasons, or special permits in the case of out-of-season conflicts with wildlife. Legislation protecting species at risk needs to be sensitive to local farming practices. Legislation enhances stewardship, but doesn't replace it.

And lastly, cost-share offers an option for society at large to share in the costs of producing food, while still maintaining the benefits of diverse wildlife populations. As Graham noted, "Wildlife is a public resource provided largely at private expense." The merits of a reasonable cost-share program for adoption of preventative measures, or compensation for livestock and crop depredation losses, or both, require continued debate.

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