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Ranchers Struggle with the Expanding Grizzly Bear Population

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It's a rancher's worst fear when you do your morning livestock check and find dead animals. That sickening feeling when you find the first dead ewe sits with you and weighs heavy on your mind. The first thought that crosses your mind is that the coyotes must have hit again. Conflict rises as you think about the situation further, thinking that coyotes usually don't take down a ewe. You think that maybe you have a lion problem. Concern grows as you find 6 more ewes and 3 lambs spread over the 1,200 acre pasture. Then you find the grizzly tracks and that 5lb scat and think "we need a bigger trap."

The fact that this was all found within a half mile of the family home alarms you. Due to the fact that this was a livestock depredation, USDA Wildlife Services was contacted first. The WS Specialist promptly arrived and after hours of thorough investigation; tracks, kill patterns, and scat confirmed that these were indeed grizzly bear kills. The grizzly bear is a threatened species protected under the Endangered Species Act, therefore limiting the rancher's ability to protect their livestock and livelihood. Over the next three days, there were three more ewes and one lamb found dead and confirmed to be grizzly kills, as well. According to the rancher and the WS Specialist, only one of the animals had been eaten on.

The WS Specialist, by protocol, notified Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks of the grizzly kill. While FWP *did* send a representative to the site to assess the situation, the FWP Head Grizzly Bear Specialist was not available to report to the kill site until 5 days later due to personal activities. Wildlife Services worked alongside the rancher to set traps to try and catch the bear (or bears) for five days with no luck.

This rancher and Wildlife Services are immediately limited in the tools that they can use for predator control on coyotes. Because the Grizzly bear is a threatened species, sodium cyanide M-44s set for coyotes must be pulled from not only this rancher's property, but the neighboring ranches in the area as well. This leaves the rancher without any ground control on predator management.

The conflict between ranchers and grizzly bears has almost become common along the Rocky Mountain Front. Grizzlies have traveled as far as Loma and Havre and are continuing to move east and even starting to den and breed off the RMF. This particular kill site was located 100 air miles off the Rocky Mountain Front and is nowhere near a major river drainage where typically grizzlies roam in the summer.

The expansion of the grizzly bear population is no longer just an issue on the Rocky Mountain Front or in the Greater Yellowstone Area. The grizzly bear numbers are growing and they have to go somewhere so they are moving out of their "typical" habitats into areas where ranchers have never had to worry about grizzly bear predation. As the grizzly bear population continues to grow, there will continue to be an increase in the incidents between grizzly bears, humans, and livestock. We may see some relief if delisting occurs, but that could still be a long way off.