

by Susan Bury and  
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# Top 10 Reasons to Support Rancher Compensation

**D**uring the past decade, a lot of people have had a lot to say about gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) in the American West. Wolf advocates have petitioned. Scientists have testified. Ranchers have protested, newspapers have editorialized, and legislators have debated.

Through the ebb and flow of 10 years of controversy, there's been one constant: When a rancher has lost livestock to wolves, an independent conservation organization—Defenders of Wildlife—has directly reimbursed the rancher for the market value.

This straightforward economic transaction is widely credited with bringing resolution to the struggle over reintroducing wolves to Yellowstone and central Idaho—one of the longest, most expensive, and hardest fought battles in wildlife conservation history. "In returning the wolf to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, several accommodations were vital so as not to negatively affect Yellowstone's neighbors," wrote Yellowstone Superintendent Michael V. Finley. "An absolutely crucial accommodation was Defenders' wolf-livestock compensation program."

More than anything else, the compensation program has built public tolerance for the wolves. Probably two out of three ranchers we speak to concerning compensation claims tell us they don't mind having the wolf around as long as they don't experience economic loss. As one Red Lodge, Montana, rancher told a reporter, "I'm really in favor of the wolves. I just don't want to feed them with a \$10,000 mare."

## It's Time to Double the Promise

From the time of the first compensation payment in 1987 until the 1995

reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone and central Idaho, Defenders paid a total of about \$16,000 for wolf losses. Then, reintroduction and subsequent reproduction bolstered wolf populations at a much faster rate than most experts expected. Unfortunately, not all wolves restricted their diet to natural prey and livestock depredations increased.

The Wolf Compensation Trust is a permanent fund that Defenders promised to maintain at \$100,000 for at least as long as the wolf remains on the endangered species list. For us to honor our future commitments, the fund and the promise need to grow. Our goal is to build the fund to \$200,000 and thereafter promise to maintain it at that level. Here are nine reasons why wildlife professionals should care about Defenders' compensation program:

1. *Defenders' compensation program addresses the basic problem.* The late William Penn Mott, Jr., set the stage in 1985. Then the director of the National Park Service, he said, "The single most important action conservation groups could take to advance Yellowstone wolf recovery would be to develop a fund to compensate ranchers for any livestock losses caused by wolves."

Defenders' compensation program respects the legitimate financial concerns of those people most directly affected by the presence of predators: the livestock producers. Ed Bangs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gray wolf recovery coordinator, says, "The livestock compensation program certainly made wolves much more tolerable to livestock producers ... and has made wolf recovery more easily attainable." Jim Peterson, executive vice president of the Montana Stockgrowers

Association, told a reporter that reintroduced wolves are a reality "...so the question becomes how can we live with them and make it as tolerable as possible. The reimbursement is certainly a step in that direction."

2. *It's the way of the future.* The compensation concept fits well with the growing trend toward collaboration on environment and conservation projects. A feature on new approaches to conservation in the October 11, 1998, the *Washington Post* identified locally based solutions, economic incentives, and collaboration as important trends.

3. *It reduces illegal killing.* Defenders' program has almost certainly reduced illegal killing of predators, which is a boon to wildlife advocates and a relief to wildlife law enforcement agents. Curt Mack is Wolf Recovery Coordinator for the Nez Perce Tribe, which has the Federal contract to manage wolf recovery in Idaho. "There was real concern in the rural ranching communities of Idaho that the wolves would eat them out of house and home," Mack says. "The Defenders' compensation program has caused these communities to have more understanding and patience, to give the project a chance. In 3 years, Defenders has compensated all confirmed losses, batting a thousand. This makes our job of trying to establish relationships with ranchers that much easier." He continues, "There's no doubt that wolves are saved by this compensation. The point I make with ranchers is that every illegal take of a wolf sets back the schedule to recovery, particularly now when every wolf is so important, and that's not in anybody's best interest."



Corel Corp. photo

4. *It's won approval from respected people in the field.* Defenders' program has won the endorsement of leading wildlife professionals. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Jamie Clark has noted that Defenders' compensation program has been "critical to the success of the wolf recovery program.... Despite the rapid increase in the wolf population, livestock are rarely attacked. But when losses do occur, the few ranchers affected are aware of the Service's wolf depredation control effort and Defenders' compensation fund, thus enabling them to accept coexistence with the wolf..." In 1990, the National Environmental Awards Council gave Defenders an Environmental Achievement Award for the fund.

5. *It's won local acceptance.* In Missoula, Montana, the *Missoulian* editorialized, "By stepping forward, checkbook in hand, Defenders has gone a long way toward diffusing the loudest and most emotional critics of restoration of free-ranging wolves." The Bozeman (Montana) *Daily Chronicle* commented, "The program shows that the Defenders aren't being pie-in-the-sky about the wolf recovery efforts.... it

is an important step that shows environmentalists are willing to work with ranchers to make the wolf reintroduction succeed."

6. *It's a great opportunity for people who care.* Visitors to natural areas often ask, "What can I do to help wildlife?" Defenders' compensation program is a wonderful answer for conservation donors who want to support practical programs that achieve direct results. Defenders takes no overhead—every dime is used to buy tolerance for the wolves. As Director Clark comments, "Individuals who supported wolf restoration and contributed to the Defenders compensation program should be proud that they can see and hear the results of their efforts in the form of living, breathing wolves roaming the two most intact ecosystems in the lower 48 States."

7. *It's simple.* In an era when large-scale programs of any kind are regularly strangled by bureaucracy—resented as much by those who must enforce the rules as those who must abide by them—the Defenders' compensation program is refreshingly simple. A rancher who believes a wolf has killed livestock contacts the appropriate State or Federal agency. A biologist visits the site, usually within 48 hours, to confirm or refute that wolves were responsible. When wolf predation is verified, the biologist sends a report to Defenders. We contact the rancher, explain our program, discuss the incident, and determine a compensation payment based on fair market value. The rancher usually receives a check within 2 weeks after Defenders receives verification from the wildlife agency.

8. *A permanent, well-funded program has greater credibility.* Some critics say that \$100,000 is not sufficient as promised compensation. We recognize that decision-makers need to be confident that the fund will continue. While we know we can meet our commitments for the short term, it's important to double the guaranteed size of the fund to prepare for the longer term.

9. *It puts the risk on the people who seek to impose the risk.* From 1987 to 1998, wolves killed about 9 livestock a year in Montana, accounting for one in 20,000 livestock deaths, according to agency livestock statistics. So wolves' impact on the industry is small—but try telling that to the Eureka, Montana, rancher who lost 16 lambs and 12 ewes in one extraordinary depredation in August 1997. Defenders paid him \$3,942 and contributed \$250 for him to hire a backhoe to bury the dead livestock so they would not attract more predators. Through Defenders' compensation program, wolf supporters insure ranchers against the risk of economic loss.

If you want a Letterman-style 10th reason to support compensation, here it is: *the Defenders' compensation program works.*

#### **Integrated into the Landscape**

Just as the reintroduced wolves so adeptly integrated themselves into the landscape of Yellowstone, so Defenders' compensation program is now integrated into the landscape of wildlife management. A few years ago, some people argued that it would never work. Now, some folks tell us that we need to make it even stronger to meet the potential demand. With the active support of the wildlife conservation community, the compensation program can continue to serve as a model of success for other important endeavors.

Defenders of Wildlife welcomes contributions of all shapes and sizes for wolf and grizzly bear compensation, and would like your suggestions for individuals, foundations, or corporations that might help us build our compensation fund. Write Hank Fischer, Defenders of Wildlife, Northern Rockies Regional Office, at 1534 Mansfield Avenue, Missoula, Montana 59801 or call at (406) 549-0761.

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