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Guest Opinion: Federal authorities suppress wolf research

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Federal wildlife biologists have taken much criticism lately for their sins of commission - falsifying lynx evidence where there were no lynx. But even more disastrous than their sins of commission, are their sins of omission. Montana House Fish Wildlife and Parks Committee Chairman Dan Fuchs, R-Billings, has obtained hard evidence of the following:

The feds have known since 1997 that elk calf ratios were being totally decimated in areas of high wolf concentration.

When Montana FWP personnel attempted to release this evidence to the public, the feds aggressively barred them from doing so.

Beginning in 1997, Carrie Schaefer did a study of Yellowstone wolf/elk interaction entitled "Spatial and Temporal Variation in Wintering Elk Abundance and Composition, and Wolf Response." Elk calf declines. Amongst other things, her study revealed that areas of high wolf concentration inside Yellowstone had calf ratios dropping precipitously - zero to 10 calves per 100, even while the ratio outside high wolf concentration areas remained at 46 calves per 100. When FWP biologist Tom Lemke and others made written request for permission to release this data to the public, the federal response to suppress it was swift, aggressive, and sustained. On Feb. 18, 1999, Yellowstone supervisory biologist Glenn Plumb wrote: "It is my position, after reviewing Ms. Schaefer's investigation, that her raw data do not warrant full distribution to the public."

On March 18, 1999, in an interoffice memo, Plumb again denied the request. And they were able to hide this striking wolf predation in the annual reports because they only gave averages for the entire northern herd - when the zero calf ratios in high wolf areas were averaged with the 46 calf ratios from elsewhere, the average was still up near the 30 calf ratio needed to sustain herd viability.

Of course, the feds rationalized their suppression by saying that Schaefer's study was just raw data and still ongoing. Yet even after her report was completed the feds never publicized nor (to our knowledge) ever gave permission to FWP to release the information. Fuchs only got a copy of Schaefer's study and the related inter-agency letters after aggressively demanding copies.

This winter when Fuchs, myself, and other officials did our own elk calf survey we discovered the calf ratio had plummeted. The initial response from amateur wolf advocates and some professional biologists was, "These guys are hacks and don't know how to count."

After the official elk census came out and totally substantiated our claims, they changed their tune. They said, "OK, they're right about the drop, but we can't prove it's due to wolves. It could be drought or hard winters, etc."

Let the Schaefer study strongly implicates wolves as the significant factor in two different ways. First,

geographically - during the course of the same winter, she observed alarmingly low calf ratios in high wolf areas even while calf ratios remained above average outside high wolf areas. This mitigates against the notion that the low calf ratios are caused by drought or hard winters. Alarming pattern revealed Secondly, when coupled with current data for the entire Northern Yellowstone elk herd, an alarming pattern is revealed. In 1997 and '98, the low calf ratio was confined to areas of high wolf concentration - the Lamar Valley, etc. In his last year or so, as wolf populations have reached critical mass across the entire northern Yellowstone range, we see the area of low calf ratio also expand to encompass the entire herd.

Let's cut to the chase (pardon the pun). Our ancestors realized long ago that the wolf is a unique critter - a killing machine and a breeding machine all rolled into one. Alaskan studies reveal wolf population increases of 34 percent annually, even while being aggressively hunted. Data from the first few years of our tri-state wolf experiment also verify this same 34 percent annual increase.

If the Feds continue to break promises, suppress evidence, and drag their feet for three to five more years; our wildlife and livestock may need to be placed on the Endangered Species List by then (never mind our pet dogs, llamas, and small children).

We are not calling for eradication of wolves. We are simply saying that NOW is the time for the feds to move immediately to de-list the wolf; so that Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho state game departments can manage wolves like any other species. It's time for the feds to make up for past sins (of commission and omission) by turning over wolf decisions to more trustworthy managers.

State Rep. Joe Balyeat represents House District 32 in the Gallatin Valley. He is vice chairman of the House Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Committee and director of the Montana Shooting Sports Association.

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