

GUEST VIEW

Tana Nulph: Montana is big enough for ranching AND grizzlies

TANA NULPH

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DIVIDE — In Montana’s Big Hole Valley, we have a tradition of coming together to resolve problems.

The Big Hole Valley includes a blue-ribbon trout stream, working farms and ranches, and the biggest national forest in Montana.

In the 1990s, the Big Hole Watershed Committee came together over concerns regarding Arctic grayling and intensifying drought. Next, a growing population of wolves prompted more work. Today, concerns include grizzly bears.

Wildlife and agriculture have coexisted since the first homesteaders. Open rangelands (as opposed to fenced subdivisions) allow for wildlife movement between mountain ranges. We’ve found that both producers and wildlife can thrive when we come together.

Today, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is considering Montana’s petition to delist grizzly bears under the Endangered Species Act. Whichever way that decision falls, we have learned some important lessons about complex wildlife challenges.

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Partnership is a key part of our success. United we thrive. Divided, our future is less certain.

In 1995, grayling were candidates for listing under the ESA. Concerned about the future of the fish — and the future of their irrigation supply — local ag producers came up with a voluntary drought management plan. Meanwhile, Fish, Wildlife & Parks revised fishing regulations for the hottest days of summer. This plan has become a model for other Montana communities.

But grayling were just the start. Our wildlife-conflict kit has several tools. We've hired a range-rider, Chet Robertson, who has spent 12 grazing seasons roaming national forests. His purpose is to keep tabs on predators and their movements, as well as discover potential trouble like sick or orphaned livestock. The goal is heading off conflicts before they happen and, if stock is killed, identifying carcasses in a timely manner to help ranchers secure reimbursement for their losses from USDA Wildlife Services

Unfortunately, there is always some livestock deaths during stressful seasons, like calving. If these carcasses are left in the wrong places, they can attract predators. Disposing carcasses at our composting facility near Wisdom, we have been able to reduce those kinds of attractants.

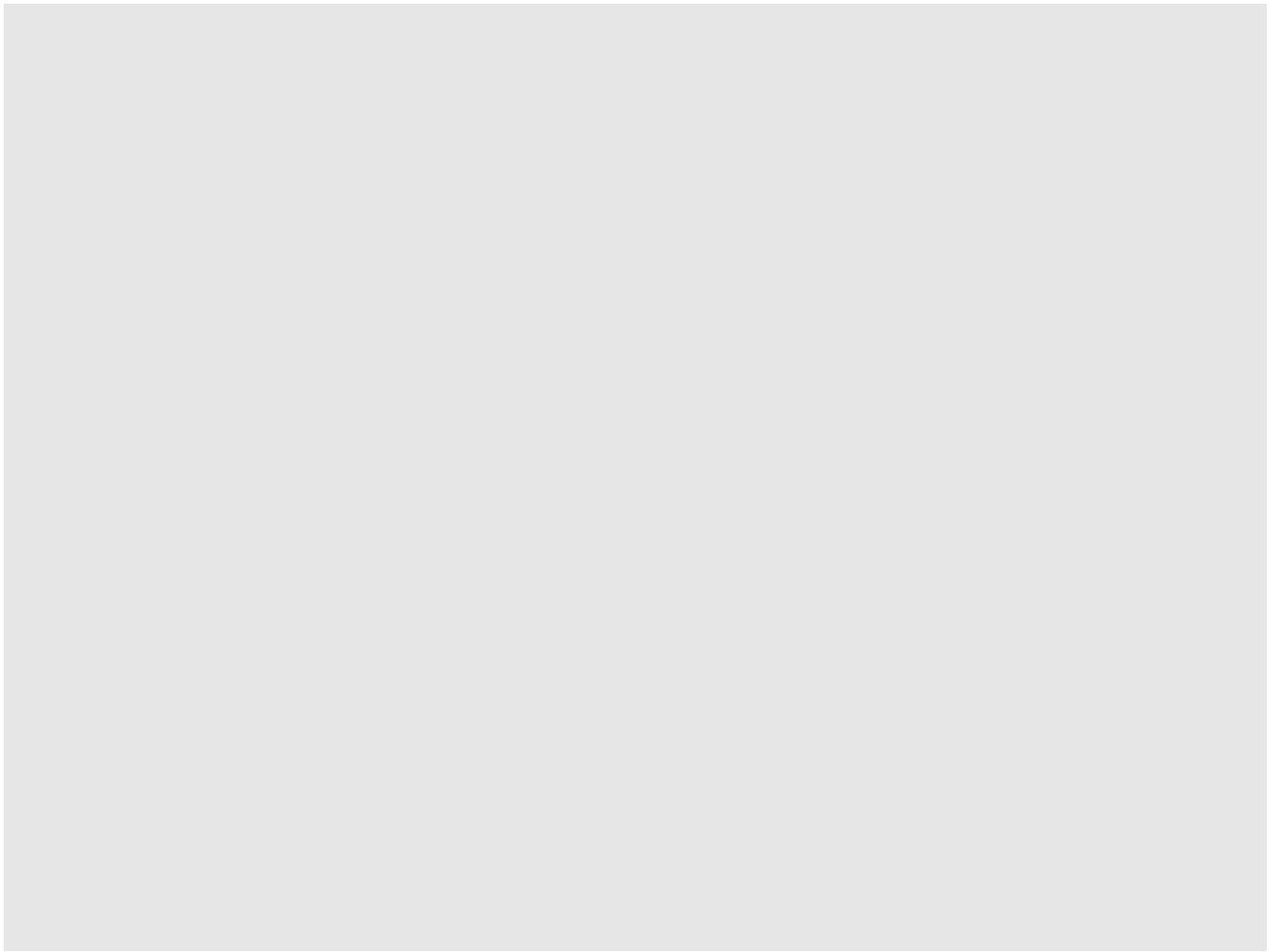
These successes led to more innovation and cooperation. For example, we borrow a dump truck from the USFWS Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge to collect the livestock carcasses. The Montana Department of Livestock's Livestock Loss Board provides funding for the range rider program, and we cost-share with the Montana Department of Transportation on the compost site. People and Carnivores in Dillon offers their expertise to local ranchers, helped us set up our compost site, and has helped us provide bear-resistant garbage cans to local residents.

In the past, a predator problem was just “resolved” by destroying that animal. But without addressing the key source of the conflict, the problems just recurred.

Society at large has decided that it wants wolves and bears on the landscape, but it is the local agricultural producers who end up dealing with them on a day-to-day basis and have the impact on their livelihoods. As a society, we must ask if it is fair to livestock producers to shoulder the costs of public wildlife as they expand their range and numbers.

Our wildlife-solution toolbox is supported by local ranchers, of course. We provide these tools on a shoestring, knotted together with grants, donations and volunteer labor. We could do even more, if we had more and more consistent funding.

As the federal and state governments figure out a future for the grizzly bear, let’s not forget their future depends on healthy ranching communities that connect wildlife habitats to each other. Predator conflict prevention tools need to be a big part of the picture.



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Courtesy photo

Tana Nulph is the associate director of the Big Hole Watershed Committee. She lives in Divide.