

# Alternative Animal Damage Control Program Takes Root

By Mitch Lies,  
GROWING Editor

A Benton County pilot program to provide alternatives to lethal predator control has issued grant funding to eight applicants, marking the launch of a program several years in the making.

The awards of up to \$5,000 are being used to build predator deterrents, such as constructing protective housing and fencing and purchasing guard animals to protect sheep, goats, other livestock and crops.

Grant recipients range from commercial farmers to hobbyists, according to Randy Comeleo, chair of the Benton County Agriculture and Wildlife Protection Program Task Group, which is administering the program. The Oregon State University Extension Service, the Chintimini Wildlife Center of Corvallis and Benton County are partner organizations in the program.

Comeleo said he introduced the program to the county four years ago. “I had heard that we had a county trapper that was using lethal control methods exclusively and I had heard about another county that had a nonlethal program,



Use of guard dogs are one means of non-lethal animal damage control endorsed by a new Benton County Agriculture Wildlife Protection Program.

so I kind of pitched it to the budget committee and they seemed interested,” said Comeleo, an ecologist with master’s degrees in the natural resources and animal sciences.

Comeleo spent the next two years talking to scientists about nonlethal and lethal predator control, talking to farmers and conducting other research. What he found convinced him nonlethal predator and animal damage control not only helped preserve

wildlife, but also was more effective.

“It is really a win-win-win,” he said.

In March, Benton County held a workshop for local farmers on the topic, bringing in John Neumeister of Cattail Creek Lamb in Junction City, a forerunner in the use of nonlethal predator control, and representatives from Marin County, Calif., the only other county in the nation that Comeleo knows of to have a nonlethal predator

control grant program.

Comeleo formally proposed the program as a pilot project to the Benton County Budget Committee in 2017. The committee backed it with \$45,000.

Grant recipients are required to provide a 25-percent in-kind match in labor, use only nonlethal predator control for at least three years and submit a report on the efficacy of their program.

Comeleo said he believes that over time, the

recipients will find nonlethal control more effective than lethal control at minimizing depredation and crop losses from nonpredators such as beaver and deer.

“It works so much better in that it is a proactive method,” Comeleo said. “You are not getting the initial loss (of livestock), so the predators aren’t learning to kill unnatural prey. If you are committed to the process, in the long run, you will save a lot of money.”

Ranchers using nonlethal control also could be eligible for wildlife-friendly certification, Comeleo said, opening up sales opportunities to outlets such as Whole Foods.

Laurie Starha, director of Benton County Natural Areas and Parks, said the program is not intended to replace the county’s existing trapping program, a program jointly funded by the county, the state and the USDA.

“The concept is to have more tools in the tool box to give more options to farmers to manage predators,” Starha said. “Not all farmers approach things the same way. This is one way the county can help support the different programs and options that are out there.”

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