Modern-day cowboys
Ranchers’ views on range riding as a solution to wolf depredation in Eastern Washington

Malia Prescott
School of Environmental and Forest Sciences, College of the Environment, University of Washington, Seattle WA

Background
The recent return of wolves to Washington has created conflict with ranchers in the eastern half of the state. Range riding increases livestock protection by tracking the movements of both cows and nearby wolves and using non-lethal hazing techniques to reduce cow-wolf contact.

Purpose
To determine the opinions of Eastern Washington ranchers on range riding as a wolf mitigation strategy.

Methods
We gathered our information through a combination of focus groups and key informant interviews, totaling 44 participants. Sampling methods consisted of purposeful and snowball recruitment of ranchers. Interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed and coded into NVivo software. The data was then analyzed to determine patterns in ranchers’ attitudes towards range riding.

Results

1. Overall opinions on range riding
   - Predominantly negative
   - Most ranchers saw at least one major flaw in the practice

2. Objections towards range riding
   - Geography: Range riding wouldn’t work on the mountainous, forested landscape
   - Impracticality: Riders would have to work 24/7 to be effective
   - Money: Insufficient or unstable funding
   - Trust: Hiring outsiders not worth the risk
   - Other: Unwilling to adapt, don’t want to deal with the government, etc.

3. Ways to make range riding effective
   Ranchers could often think of scenarios in which range riding would work, even if they were opposed to it

   - “It’d have to be a totally private deal, with the government out of it... no strings attached.”
   - “We’ve found the successful ones in Montana are usually the rancher’s kids, or family members that’ve worked for ‘em in the area.”
   - “The knowledge is key. Knowing where that wolf is. Knowing where that pack is. So you can get in there and disrupt them from molesting the cattle”

Discussion
As Washington’s wolf population continues to increase, ranchers are going to have to adapt their management strategies to reduce livestock losses or risk going out of business. Range riding is viewed by many ranchers to be an ineffective solution due to geography, impracticality, funding, trust, and other constraints, but there are also those who believe it can work. Currently there are several range riders working in Washington who are experiencing fewer losses since beginning participation in the program. If these ranchers continue to see success over time, perhaps overall opinion of range riding will become more positive. More investigation into acceptance of alternate wolf mitigation strategies will be needed to determine the best solution that is both effective and socially accepted.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to my faculty advisor, Professor John Marzluff, my graduate mentors Carol Bogezi and Catherine Gowan, as well as McIntire-Stennis Program at USDA for making this project possible.