

Stemming grizzly bloodshed

By Mike Koshmrl | Posted: Wednesday, July 13, 2016 4:30 am

CORA — Range rider Phil McGinnis was trotting around on horseback in an open sagebrush-steppe pasture pushing a spread-out group of cow, calf and yearling cattle into something more resembling a clump.

The maneuver, to the untrained eye, didn't look like much. The livestock were scattered over a couple hillsides, and then, after McGinnis rode by with his cattle dog, scattered a little less.

A lot of hope, however, hangs on the herding technique, which is being tested out as a trial at the Mosquito Lake pasture in the Bridger-Teton National Forest's massive Upper Green River rangeland allotment. The desire of McGinnis, cattleman Albert Sommers and a number of conservationists is that the more bunched-up bovinds will be somewhat less prone to ending up as dinner for a grizzly bear.

"After last year, I would have tried anything," said Sommers, who presides over the Upper Green River Cattle Association and is also Sublette County's representative in the Wyoming House.

The death toll the third-generation rancher amassed last year in the four-month grazing season: 80 cattle killed by bears and another 10 lost to wolves.

"That's confirmed," Sommers said. "We were short 290 head of calves."

The stockman, whose ball cap touts the "grizzly-tested, wolf-approved" taste of his cattle, let out an unexpected laugh.

"That's a lot," Sommers said, regaining himself. "It was 14 percent of all our calves."



Bear Conflict

Range rider Phil McGinnis looks for cattle in the Mosquito Lake pasture of the Upper Green River Cattlemans Association's Bridger-Teton National Forest grazing allotment. Last year the association lost 80 calves and yearling cows to bears and 10 to wolves.

Going by the numbers, the scope of depredation that now befalls the Upper Green cattle herds annually is unparalleled in the Lower 48. Losses last year on the public land allotments on Union Pass vastly exceeded the total number of cattle killed by grizzlies in the entire state of Montana, where about 1,000 members of the *Ursus arctos horribilis* roam.

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition and People and Carnivores, a Montana-based rangeland stewardship and carnivore conservation group, get the credit for pointing Sommers toward some potential solutions.

The coalition's Chris Colligan got involved with a "goal to keep bears alive."

Sommers, whose objective is to keep cows alive, agreed to collaborate because he thought they could be mutual goals.

The herding technique McGinnis has committed himself to this summer isn't exclusively used to reduce conflicts with predators, People and Carnivores rangeland scientist Matt Barnes said. It's a tactic that's used for general range management, he said, but has the ancillary benefit of curbing depredation.

"The whole idea is that wild, free animals tend to aggregate into larger groups in response to predator pressure," Barnes said. "If we can replicate that behavior to some degree in cattle they won't be as vulnerable as they otherwise would be if they were scattered out everywhere."

The concept has been successful over the top of the Continental Divide, on the Shoshone National Forest's adjacent Union Peak grazing allotment. For the last three years Barnes has helped manage a herd of about 600 cattle there, and the bunched-up cows have so far been more resilient.

"They haven't had a confirmed depredation for two years now," Barnes said. "Whether that's because of what we're doing, we don't really know for sure."

The year before the bunching technique kicked off Union Peak allotment ranchers confirmed six stock lost to grizzlies and had another 13 suspected losses.

Debuting the bunching technique on Sommers' allotment, however, will present a new set of challenges. The rangeland is vast, at 323 square miles, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated that between 51 and 60 grizzlies reside on the Upper Green allotments and the immediate surrounding area.

"This is definitely the largest landscape that we've worked on yet," Barnes said. "Most of the tools that have been developed for preventing depredations have all been developed in farmland or pastureland situation. They all basically rely on a small area."

A portion of the 1,200 head of livestock McGinnis is riding to congregate every night — a number that counts cow-calf pairs as one — are what Sommers refers to as the "tail end." It's a segment of the

association's cattle that is the last to find its way to the Bridger-Teton allotment after the 58-mile Green River Drift cattle drive. The lagging animals are the "sick, lame and the lazy," and Sommers has a theory they're the most vulnerable to predators.

"You end up with 200 or so that are the worst of the worst," he said. "I think they get hit the worst."

It's a good sign, then, that the "tail end" cows munching on Mosquito Lake pasture greens are so far holding up. Only a handful of Upper Green River Cattle Association livestock are confirmed dead by grizzlies so far this year, and just a lone calf has been confirmed bear-killed in the Mosquito Lake unit.

It's still early in the grazing season, however, and Sommers isn't yet convinced he's found a long-term solution.

"I'm not overly optimistic," he said. "All ranchers are pessimistic, so I don't go into anything thinking it's going to work, but I'm dang sure willing to try things. I don't think there's any reason not to."

To reduce cow carcasses grizzlies can feed on, Sommers has also directed his riders to go to greater lengths to remove dead and wounded cattle from the range. And he's working with the Bridger-Teton on getting clearance to use explosives to speed up the decomposition process for carcasses too deep into the range to retrieve.

Getting rid of carcasses, Barnes said, is another piece of the conflict-reduction puzzle.

"It's not that a bear or a wolf eating a carcass acquires a taste for beef," he said. "It's a point-source attractant that just puts them in contact with live animals, and sooner or later they're going to say, 'One of those looks tasty.'"

Sommers spoke fondly of using guard dogs as a potential conflict-mitigation tool, but they were shot down by the association because of logistics and liability. Earlier this year a Colorado woman reached a \$1 million settlement with an Eagle County rancher whose Great Pyrenees sheep guard dog attacked her during a mountain bike race. Guard dogs in the heavily recreated Upper Green would have been expensive, too.

"We would have to be paid for 164 dead calves before we even broke even on the deal," Sommers said.

The approximately \$1 million in Wyoming Game and Fish Department depredation compensation that Upper Green ranchers have received during the past five years surely makes grazing cattle alongside grizzlies a more reasonable endeavor.

But Sommers said the cash flow isn't a deterrent for trying to ease the chronic conflict.

"Ultimately, I don't grow cattle to feed bears," Sommers said. "I don't like to see my cattle up here

stirred up, stressed, hunted, and so if there's something we can do to make that whole situation better, I'll try it.

"If this works," he said, "I'll try it again next year."