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Wolf-Rancher Health Maintenance Organization: A Conservation And Community Health Model

To the Editor:

We wish to share information about our collaborative effort of ranchers and environmentalists to resolve the conflict between wolves and ranchers in rural western communities by using health as a framework. Wolf restoration in the Northern Rockies has been an ecological and biological success, but wolves remain a source of controversy in western rural communities. In addition to being associated with livestock losses, the wolf is a surrogate for cultural and sociopolitical conflict affecting rural western communities beyond the wolf.¹ Although wolf-related livestock losses are few compared with other causes, predation further jeopardizes the marginal financial viability of ranchers and thus threatens loss of ranchlands that support biodiversity and wildlife habitat to exurban development, in effect escalating a destructive disconnection between economy and ecology.^{2,3} Reactive killing of wolves by ranchers endangers the species recovery and its beneficial ecosystem effects. Ironically, a solution to this dual tragedy of conflict—and a novel economic resource—may be the wolf.

A “think tank” of professionals in wolf biology, wildlife conservation, ranching, natural resource economics, environmental ethics, public policy, and health care have proposed a concept for resolving wolf-rancher conflict. By using a risk-sharing health maintenance organization model, viable wolf numbers are maintained in a suitable habitat adjacent to participating communities by matching the presence of wolves to “premium” dollars funded by a national development campaign. Funds flowing through this organization will provide financial incentives for improving the health of rural western communities and for protecting wolves and wildlife habitat by transforming the wolf from a perceived liability into an asset, thus elevating debate beyond economics versus the environment. Our model is linked to community foun-

dations to provide social, health, economic, and educational value to rural western communities as a means to help achieve our goals:

- Demonstrate that economic development and wildlife conservation are compatible
- Provide economic assistance for sustainable ranching and best ranching practices
- Provide compensation for livestock predation by using a reasonable formula that accounts for tangible and intangible costs
- Support proactive programs to prevent wolf predation on livestock
- Promote healthier food products to sustain rural western economies
- Prevent loss of rural western ranches and farms to exurban development
- Preserve private lands that support wildlife and biodiversity
- Develop opportunities for eco-tourism and eco-labeling to bolster local economies
- Provide support to colleges and universities to engage with their rural communities in research and applied programs in health, economy, and the environment
- Provide scholarships for community youth to attend local colleges and universities
- Transform cultural and political attributes toward the wolf and ranching
- Preserve wolves, wildlife, and the ranching way of life

In an effort to build local tolerance for the wolf, Defenders of Wildlife initiated the first privately funded livestock compensation program of its kind in 1987 to provide reimbursement for wolf-related losses. The Bailey Wildlife Foundation Wolf Compensation Fund, named in honor of its largest contributor, has reimbursed ranchers more than \$328 000 in the Northern Rockies since its inception. This program was designed to compensate for livestock losses while wolves were listed as a federally protected endangered species. However, the US Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing delisting wolves from federal protection under the Endangered Species Act and allowing states in the Northern Rockies to manage them under state authority. State officials have identified compensation from predation as important to their future management of wolves. Defenders of Wildlife and our ranching partners agree that an innovative, comprehensive approach inclusive of but beyond compensation is necessary if both ranching and wolves are to survive.

The collaborative process of developing this project has created a unique partnership of the ranching and environmental community. Members of our steering com-

mittee have attended meetings in rural western communities to present our model and to receive feedback. As a result of grassroots efforts, we have developed partnerships within the ranching communities of Madison Valley, MT; Eagle Creek, AZ; and Salmon, ID. Ranchers from these areas serve on our steering and advisory committees along with representatives from Defenders of Wildlife and from the state and federal government.

Our program is designed to change attitudes, culture, behavior, and philosophy toward ranching, wolves, and other wildlife by demonstrating the positive economic and social outcomes that result when the economy is partnered with its environment. We hope that changing conflicts into cooperative and mutually beneficial outcomes will influence public policy by encouraging more solution-based regulations and management. Our program endeavors to achieve a “win-win” outcome for economy and ecology in the rural west by using health as a framework.

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