Controlling Predators to Reduce Production Risks in Small Ruminants

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Introduction

Predator attacks are a controllable risk on most farms in the U.S.; however, this statement may not hold true on all farms. According to the USDA (Bulletin 588), predators caused $27.4 million in losses to the sheep and goat industry in 1990. The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) reported that sheep and lamb losses due to predators totaled 273,000 animals in 1999. Most of the losses were contributed to coyotes and wild dogs. These attacks resulted in a total cost of more than $16 million to sheep producers (NCAT Staff, 2002). Other predators that should be of concern to producers are bobcats, wolves, eagles, hawks and even the family pet dog may prey on your herd or flock, thus increasing your production and eventually your financial risks.

Identifying the Predators on Your Farm

There are ten basic criteria that can be used to determine the types of predators you may have on your property and they are: 1. The time of the attack, 2. The duration of the attack, 3. The temperament of the flock or herd, 4. The extent of the attack or kill, 5. The location of the attack on the animal, 6. The targeted animals, 7. The attacking behavior, 8. The predators tracks that were left at the site, 9. The predator's droppings and, 10. The feeding behavior of the predator. Coyotes tend to kill their victims quickly at night or during the early dawn. Typically, what you will find is an animal with severe puncture wounds on the throat, just behind the jaw or under the ears. They will generally kill only one or two animals close to areas with plenty of cover to allow them to escape. Coyotes eat their kill by first feeding on the abdominal cavity. If lambs, kids or small animals are missing, coyotes are generally responsible. Coyotes tend to take smaller animals back to their den, especially when feeding their pups (Tapscott, 2007). Dog attacks on the other hand, will occur any time of the day or night. They are usually poor predators, and their attacks will last much longer, and affect more of the flock or the herd, so the goat or sheep that are left alive, are nervous and confused after the attack. Dogs will usually attack goats or sheep or other livestock for the chase, not for food. They will cause more slashing and ripping of the wounds and mutilation of the legs, ears, tails, and hindquarters on both the dead and surviving animals (NCAT Staff, 2002).

Because of predation problems, a growing number of producers are purchasing guardian animals (i.e., llamas, burros and dogs) to protect their livestock. However, the first line of defense against predators should always be the perimeter fence. Adequate fencing is necessary for keeping the animals in and the predators out (McKenzie-Jakes, 2007). On the same note, make sure your trees are trimmed away from the fence line, so predators cannot climb in and gain access onto your facility, and the limbs cannot destroy your fence after a storm. If predators are continually a big problem on your farm, keep your animals out of the pastures that are prone to predator attacks, especially during the kidding or lambing season or try using light-sensing monitors to illuminate your animal's pens at night. The lights activate at dusk and deactivate at dawn which can severely intimidate some predators. If this method is not effective,
try using a propane exploder to produce a loud explosion at random intervals or place bells on your animals, the noise should discourage predators from coming near, use a radio to create a noisy environment, park your vehicle in or near the areas where the attacks are commonly occurring (Tapscott, 2007) or consider building a loafing yard or lambing shed (enclosed structures) to secure your animals overnight or when there is no one around for long periods of time (McKenzie-Jakes, 2007). The pens should be close to your home, so if there is an intruder on the farm, you may hear your animal’s cries of distress and take the appropriate actions before further damage is done. If none of these suggestions prove helpful for your farm, to prevent further losses you may need to purchase a guardian animal such as a burro, a llama or a dog to help protect your herd or flock. Although guardian dogs have been used for centuries in many countries around the world, not all dogs are good guardians. In fact, some dogs have been known to turn against the ones they are supposed to protect, so shop wisely. Burros and llamas have also been used effectively for controlling predators on some farms, but like canines, some guardians may not be suited for protecting the herd or flock from predators. Therefore, it is always best to observe the new guardians for the first couple weeks of their stay to ensure they are what you need for your farm. Always remember that guardian animals of any species should be used as a tool for controlling predators and not the only method (McKenzie-Jakes, 2007). If you still lose animals due to predator attacks or other causes, dispose of the carcasses immediately, so that coyotes and other scavengers are not attracted to your farm.

Summary

Predators can be a big problem for some goats and sheep owners in the U.S. Fortunately, there are several methods that have proven effective for controlling predators on some farms such as building a loafing yard, trimming the trees away from the fence line, lighting the pens in the evening or locating the animals in a area that is not prone to predator attacks. Keep in mind, the first line of defense against predators should always be a strong, impenetrable, perimeter fence. If your fencing is unable to keep predators off of your facility, purchase a guardian animal to help protect your investment, thus hopefully you will be able to reduce your production as well as your financial risks. Both the burrow and the llama have been used effectively for controlling predators on some farms and guardian dogs have proven more effective on other farms. Regardless of the type of guardian you purchase, make sure you observe your new animals for at least a couple of weeks after buying them to make sure they are the best fit for your farm.

References


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