

From the pages of
Sublette Examiner
Volume 5, Number 41 - January 5, 2006
brought to you online by [Pinedale Online](#)

Defenders fails to compensate
by Cat Urbigkit

Although Defenders of Wildlife is credited with providing compensation for livestock producers who lose stock to reintroduced gray wolves, the program has come under increased criticism of late, with producers complaining that Defenders isn't paying its bills.

The Examiner was able to contact seven producers who had confirmed losses to wolves in the last year, and none of whom have received compensation, although they filed claims with Defenders.

Eddie Wardell said his family hasn't received even a penny from Defenders, despite submitting claims for confirmed kills in 2003 and 2004. The 2003 claim involved one adult cow. Defenders phoned Wardell about three months after he submitted the claim, he said, notifying him that the group was processing his claim and stating that Wardell didn't have all the information Defenders wanted in the proper form. Wardell said it was his understanding that Defenders would send him a letter about the situation, but he never heard from them again. For his 2004 claim involving two calves, Defenders never responded. Since Wardell sent in both claims via certified mail, he knows the group received the claims.

Albert Sommers said he never received compensation for last year's claim involving three confirmed calf kills either. Defenders never even responded, he said.

Bondurant rancher Bill Saunders is in the same boat. His claim for one confirmed horse kill was sent to Defenders, but he "never heard a single word from them."

Allen Ferguson of Bar Cross Ranch said that although he submitted a claim for one yearling heifer that was confirmed as a wolf kill, Defenders has never responded. He tried repeatedly to get Defenders' Suzanne Stone on the phone to discuss the matter, but couldn't get her on the phone, a problem other producers said they encountered as well.

Ferguson said he was surprised at Defenders' lack of action, since the organization was prompt to pay claims for four prior calf kills. Ferguson noted that after Defenders paid for the four calf kills, he received a survey asking his level of satisfaction with the process. He was satisfied then, but things have now changed.

Mary Thoman said Defenders never responded to her family's claim for a livestock guardian dog that was killed by a wolf in the Upper Green last year. Dar Mantle Vogle has tried numerous

times to get Defenders to act on her claim for injuries to two of the horses her family uses in their business Wyoming Horses, but to no avail, even though her claim was submitted with the USDA Wildlife Services investigative reports confirming the wolf depredations.

Randy Kruger of Meeteetse never received compensation for his calf confirmed as a wolf kill on the ranch last year either. On its compensation instruction form, Defenders noted: "We pay 100 percent of the market value for confirmed losses up to \$2,000 per animal and 50 percent of the value for probable losses. We pay for livestock and livestock guarding or herding dogs killed or injured by wolves. Most claims are processed in less than six weeks."

Defenders maintains that the goal of the compensation program is "to shift economic responsibility for wolf recovery away from the individual rancher and toward the millions of people who want to see wolf populations restored. When ranchers alone are forced to bear the cost of wolf recovery, it creates animosity and ill will toward the wolf. Such negative attitudes can result in illegal killing."

As for how long the program will be in existence, the Defenders website states: "The compensation trust will be maintained for as long as the wolf is on the endangered species list in that wolf recovery area. Through continuing donations from members and supporters, Defenders maintains a \$200,000-plus trust to pay for compensation. The interest is reinvested, so the trust will continue to grow unless rates of livestock loss increase dramatically. If demands for the trust increase, Defenders will expand it accordingly."

Contacted for a response to the seven producers interviewed in this article, Defenders of Wildlife Northern Rockies Representative Suzanne Asha Stone stated: "To protect the identity of the livestock producers who seek compensation, it is Defenders' policy to maintain confidentiality regarding compensation requests. Therefore, we will provide general information rather than address individual compensation requests unless we receive permission from the livestock owners involved."

Stone reported after researching the cases in this article, "In one case, a producer refused to provide a tax identification or social security number, which we are required by law to obtain in order to make payments. Another individual was paid for claims in 2003 but did not return repeated contact attempts by Defenders staff to determine the 2004 claim value. Another submitted information that did not meet the minimum criteria for a confirmed or probable depredation. We sought additional information from the field investigating agency regarding the latter request but no further information was available. Another individual has notified us that the payment had not been received. We determined that it had been unintentionally misfiled and began processing the payment immediately. I am still investigating the others and we will follow up directly with those individuals."

Stone noted that both wolf numbers and depredation occurrences increased, with Defenders having to double its payments from previous years in 2004.

"This meant an increase in some of the administrative challenges of the program," Stone said. "For example, we received a number of compensation requests that lacked pertinent information to process the claims, which can take considerable time to obtain. Some field investigation reports did not provide enough information to meet the minimum criteria for confirmed or probable claims and some claims were rejected."

Stone said that FWS reports that wolves in the Northern Rockies were confirmed to have killed 429 cattle and 1,074 sheep from 1987 to 2004, of which Defenders paid for 416 cattle and 1,323 sheep.

She noted: "Some of the extra sheep include animals that died later or that were unborn at the time of the depredation. These statistics certainly confirm that we are paying for nearly all confirmed depredations."