

Could Llamas Guard Your Cattle?

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Present Use of Guard Llamas

During the past 20 years of birth and growth in the llama industry in North America, llamas were occasionally pastured with sheep. To the surprise of owners, they observed fewer sheep were being lost to coyotes and dogs. Sheep producers began experimenting with llamas as guard animals. The vast majority of guard llamas in use today are found in the Intermountain/Rocky Mountain region and the Far West.

It has become commonplace for sheep producers to utilize llamas for sheep flocks. It has been reported that a well-managed guard llama will bond with sheep, and may be used with the same flock for 15 years or more. The long distances that guard dogs travel (200-600 miles each year) takes a harder toll on the dogs, resulting in only 2-3 years of usefulness for guard dogs on western range sheep operations.

The Research

There is no documented evidence that llamas can be as effective with beef cattle herds as with sheep. A study of the usefulness of llamas as guards animals for cattle began in 1996 on the Warm Springs Reservation on 64 acres of tribal land leased to Oregon State University and the 4-H Program. It is on the fringe of the community area - just far enough away for feral dogs to be a problem. The test herd used in the 1996-97 season consisted of four cows, five calves (one cow had twins) and one yearling heifer. In 1997-98, the herd consisted of five cows, two yearling heifers, and five calves. The herds were on a fall-calving schedule, and all calved out by the first date indicated in the chart.

The pasture used was 64 acres; half in sagebrush / crested wheatgrass, one-fourth alfalfa, one-fourth improved grass. The length of time this study ran was approximately six months during both seasons. Herd was allowed to graze alfalfa only after the third cutting, one month prior to and one month post-calving. The 16-acre improved grass pasture was used for 3 months, while the 32-acre sagebrush pasture was grazed one month.

A 10-year old stud llama was used in this study. The Fall of 1996 was a particularly unfavorable season for calves on the Warm Springs Reservation, as approximately \$40,000 in beef calves was lost due to predation by feral dogs and coyotes. The fall and winter of 1996 was an especially snowy winter. Hunting pressure (for predators) off the reservation was high. Coyotes quickly learned that Warm Springs was a safe haven for them, with lots of easy pickings. It is assumed that a large number of predators were passing through just as fall calving season got under way.

Regardless of the approach when dealing with predators, particularly the adaptive coyote, no method is 100% effective. It has been found that sheep first introduced to guard llamas on open range tend to have higher predator losses than those introduced and bonded into a confined corral type system. Although lambs become bonded to llamas and can be found interacting playfully with llamas, llamas introduced to ewes and lambs are no more effective than those introduced to weaned or dry ewes. This is a direction that the calving beef herd research will be headed. It is felt that without doubt, the use of llamas to guard flocks generally is a methodology to reduce predation, not to reduce the population of the predators.

Research Results

The results of this phase of the study are mixed. The second phase of the research will be conducted using a young gelded llama because research shows that gelded llamas work better for sheep-guarding than do stud llamas. It is possible that gelded llamas may be more effective than stud llamas when guarding cattle as well. This research will continue with at least two gelded llamas, and will probably give rise to more questions about herd protection.

About the Author:

Bob (Tex) Pawelek received a B.S. Animal Science from Texas A&M University, and a Master's of Agriculture from Oregon State University. Bob Pawelek serves as OSU Extension faculty at Warm Springs Reservation.