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Ethan Gilliam

Utah State University Extension, ethan.gilliam@usu.edu

Anna Gilliam

Utah State University Extension, anna.gilliam@usu.edu

Jody Gale

Utah State University, jody.gale@usu.edu

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Balancing Agriculture and Wildlife: The Impact of Elk and Deer Grazing on Farming and Ranching Lands

Ethan Gilliam, Anna Gilliam, Jody Gale

Abstract

This article examines producers' perceptions of elk and deer grazing on their lands through a survey conducted at the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) National Conference. With 140 complete responses, the study underscores the varying impacts of elk/deer grazing. The findings emphasize the need for enhanced collaboration between agricultural stakeholders and wildlife management authorities to address wildlife grazing impacts effectively. These findings also address the critical opinion of producers toward wildlife inside and outside of their private operations, as well as the interactions between producers and wildlife authorities.

Introduction

On average, 166 people are fed by one farm in the United States annually, and less than two percent (2%) of the American population comprises farming and ranching families (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2021). One significant problem farmers and ranchers in Utah face is crop/forage loss due to wildlife grazing, and while some farmers and ranchers support wildlife grazing, some may be strongly opposed (Utah Wildlife Board Meeting, 2012). Although mediation procedures are in place in Utah, these issues cause contention between residents in the same community representing different organizations.

According to a statewide needs assessment of elected county officials, assisting farmers in ag production and profitability and preserving agricultural farmland was identified as a critical issue (Narine, 2021). Understanding the positions of farmers and ranchers on national issues can seed conversations that address the competition between wildlife sustainability and farming/ranching sustainability (Kross et al., 2018).

Response & Target Audience

The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) National Conference was held in Salt Lake City, Utah, from January 19 to 24, 2024. Representatives of the AFBF from all levels of leadership, including President Zippy Duvall, attended the event, which was also open to the public. Utah State University (USU) Extension faculty recognized the event's diverse attendance and capitalized on the opportunity to explore public perceptions of wildlife grazing. A five-question survey was developed and administered at the USU Extension booth in the conference's convention/trade show section. The survey was open to any willing participants. This approach facilitated data collection from a national spectrum of agricultural stakeholders at the conference. The survey was administered during trade show hours on the 20th, 21st, and 22nd.

The target audience for the survey was U.S. farmers and ranchers, who are notably active in the AFBF and represented at its national convention. While the survey was available to all interested parties, many participants were involved in farming or ranching.

Results

A total of 140 complete surveys ($n = 140$) were collected and analyzed from the convention. The results are presented in Tables 1-5 below.

Table 1

Responses to Elk/deer Grazing issues on Private Agricultural Land

Do you experience issues with elk/deer grazing your crops/private ground?		
	Yes	No
Count	90	50
Percentage	64.29%	35.71%

Table 2

Responses of Mediation efforts put forward by Stakeholders

Have you participated in some kind of mediation for elk/deer grazing?		
	Yes	No
Count	32	108
Percentage	22.86%	77.14%

Table 3

Responses to Elk/Deer Grazing around Stakeholder Operations

Do you have a positive or negative opinion of the elk/deer around your operations?			
	Positive	Negative	No Opinion
Count	38	51	51
Percentage	27.14%	36.43%	36.43%

Table 4

Responses to Elk/Deer Grazing Outside Stakeholder Operations

Do you have a positive or negative opinion of the elk/deer outside of your operations?			
	Positive	Negative	No Opinion
Count	60	33	47
Percentage	42.86%	23.57%	33.57%

Table 5

Responses to Relationship Status of Stakeholders with Wildlife Officials

Do you have a positive or negative relationship with wildlife officials?			
	Positive	Negative	No Opinion
Count	97	7	36
Percentage	69.29%	5.00%	25.71%

Survey participants frequently interacted with extension personnel, highlighting the significance of wildlife grazing's impacts on agricultural operations nationwide. Most (64%) reported grazing issues from elk or deer, but only 23% engaged in mediation efforts. Attitudes towards wildlife were mixed, with nearly equal distribution among positive, negative, and neutral perspectives regarding its effect on operations. Notably, 43% had a generally positive view of wildlife outside their operations, while a minimal 5% reported negative interactions with wildlife officials, contrasting with 70% expressing positive relations.

Public Value & Next Steps

The survey initiates a national dialogue on wildlife-livestock grazing conflicts, highlighting the challenges farmers and ranchers face in delivering their products to market despite their crucial role in meeting global food demands. Recognizing the importance of wildlife for various recreational activities, it emphasizes the need for balanced solutions to address agricultural concerns. An ever-increasing population will demand current research and effective actions to address these grazing issues. Future efforts will focus on assessing the long-term impact of elk/deer grazing in selected areas of southern Utah and replicating the study in other regions to inform and create effective management strategies.

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