

Saskatchewan minister defends coyote bounty

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REGINA — More than 71,000 coyotes that had a bounty on their heads have been killed in Saskatchewan, but critics say the number is appalling and doesn't solve a predator problem.

Agriculture Minister Bob Bjornerud said Wednesday that the number of coyotes destroyed under the pilot program was a surprise. But he was pleased with the results and said the cull was necessary because the animals had become a threat to livestock and farm families.

"We certainly didn't start out to eradicate coyotes in the province. That wasn't our intention at all," said Bjornerud. "But we had to do something with the number of problems that it was creating with ... calves and sheep and things like that across the province.

"The other problem was that there was almost no respect in the coyote population. They were packing up, coming right into yards. We talked before about them coming onto porches and eating out of the dog dish and in some cases killing the pets. The farm dog ... was being lured out by packs and being killed."

The Saskatchewan government introduced its five-month coyote control program last November. It offered hunters, farmers and ranchers \$20 per dead coyote as long as all four paws were brought in. The final cost to the province will be about \$1.5 million.

Bjornerud said the next step is to gauge the cull's effectiveness, but that's difficult because no one knows how many coyotes are in Saskatchewan. Estimates peg the numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

What is known, according to Jack Hextall, chairman of the Saskatchewan Cattlemen's Association, is that attacks on livestock were costing producers thousands of dollars in losses.

"They're getting more aggressive than what they have been in the past," he said. "It's certainly a problem."

Hextall said he believes the cull will help.

Biologists and conservationists disagree. They argue the bounty has upset nature's balance by removing a predator that helps keep gopher, fox or deer populations in check.

"The knee-jerk reaction by people always is to kill predators. We've been doing it as Europeans for hundreds of years. It won't fix the problem," said Mark Brigham, a biology professor at the University of Regina. "Coyotes are going to come right back in a couple of years and there's going to be lots of them."

Brigham said producers should be compensated if they lose an animal, but a cull is not the solution. Coyotes go through cycles like lots of other things and nature will keep things in check, he suggested.

Lorne Scott, who is a farmer as well as president of Nature Saskatchewan, said coyotes should only be killed if they're causing problems in specific areas.

"A lot of these coyotes probably were coyotes that were causing no problems with domestic animals and they were probably consuming a lot of Richardson's ground squirrels, which are a problem in some areas," said Scott.

"Biologically it's simply not a good way to manage wildlife. We still maintain that the bounty is non-selective. It removes animals that are actually the farmer's friend. Most coyotes are beneficial to landowners."

But the coyote is resilient, Scott added. "They will simply produce more young and fill in the niche where the animals were taken out."

The coyote bounty has drawn criticism from across the country and may have contributed to shootings elsewhere. More than 30 coyotes were found shot dead and with their paws cut off on a roadside in Cypress Hills Provincial Park in southeastern Alberta near the boundary. A spokesman for the Alberta government said the Saskatchewan bounty may have been behind the slaughter.

However, in April, Nova Scotia announced a similar coyote program amid public fears that the animals are getting more aggressive toward people. Concern was sparked last October when a young Toronto woman, singer Taylor Mitchell, was mauled to death while hiking alone in Cape Breton Highlands National Park.

"If we had waited until something like that would have happened -- and I'm not saying it would have, but it might have -- I think then I would have been criticized on the other side for not taking some kind of action," said Bjornerud.