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Large Crowd Assembles To Learn About Guard Dogs For Livestock

By Colleen Schreiber

MENARD — Under cloudy skies, sheep and goat producers recently gathered to learn about the use of livestock protection dogs as a non-lethal predator management tool. The large number of ranchers who turned out was a good indication of the growing interest in the tool. It was clear that these dogs are offering renewed hope to those trying to raise sheep and goats in what has become a coyote-infested land.

The field day was hosted by the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center at San Angelo. John Walker, resident director of research, welcomed the group to the Martin Ranch, a ranch leased by A&M for research purposes. He told the group that they've been successfully running guard dogs with sheep and goats here for the last couple of years.

In 2009, the first year they leased the ranch, the lamb crop was 20 percent; their neighbor to the south had already quit raising sheep because of predators. A&M decided to give guard dogs a try. In 2014 their ewes weaned a 127 percent lamb crop, and in 2015 and 2016, 121 and 127 percent, respectively. A couple of weeks ago they marked 121 percent.

Likewise, their nannies weaned a 125 percent kid crop last year, and this year they marked 125 percent.

At the research center in San Angelo where livestock for research trials are kept, town dogs were the number-one predator problem. Two years ago they added guard dogs there as well, and they haven't had a town dog attack since.

The Martin ranch does not have a live-in caretaker, but someone is typically on the ranch two or three times a week. Jake Thorne is farms manager and research assistant stationed at the San Angelo Research and Extension center. He addressed the crowd regarding some of the basics of their program on the Martin Ranch and fielded numerous questions.

Altogether, A&M runs about 250 ewes and 175 meat goat nannies on 5000 acres. Typically they keep four livestock protection dogs out with the livestock. Though it varies by individual, Thorne told listeners that it's common to run a dog for every 100 to 200 sheep and goats.

"A really good dog could probably protect more than that," he added, and then noted, too, that there is such a thing as too many

dogs, as it often leads to confrontations, and in some cases one or more of the dogs is pushed off feed.

The animals are rotated throughout the ranch, but essentially the sheep are grouped together and the goats form another group. The pastures are typically about a section in size. They have one dog that stays exclusively with the goats, and the other three guard the sheep.

“The dogs have a hierarchy, and the one dog was sort of the low man on the totem pole,” said Thorne. “He did not get to eat as much, and so he took refuge with the goats.”

The dogs are crossbred, but their longer hair indicates some Pyrenees blood. The long, hot summers and the grass burs and wintergrass spears can be hard on them.

“They’re really a little too long-haired for this country,” Thorne admitted.

The dogs are vaccinated annually for rattlesnakes and rabies, and they all get a parvo and distemper shot as well. As often as they can get their hands on them, they also get a flea and tick topical treatment, and they’re dewormed regularly.

As for feeding, they put out 50-pound sacks of dog food twice a week. The gates have a “dugout” on one side about nine inches off the ground, just enough for the dog to slip under but still capable of keeping the sheep and goats out.

“I won’t say it’s a perfect plan,” he admitted. “We still have issues with other animals eating the dog food.”

To cut down on the raccoon problem they put out leg-hold raccoon traps.

Walker warned that no dog is perfect.

“They make mistakes. They will kill lambs; I have pictures of them killing lambs, but it’s usually young dogs.”

There can be other issues as well. A few years back they moved some weaned lambs across the highway to graze them out for a month or two. A guard dog that had been with the lambs the entire time went with them, but the dog did not stay with the lambs in their new location. Coyotes killed 30 lambs, Walker said.

That led into a discussion about using GPS trackers to keep track of the dogs. Because researchers are doing extensive research on the livestock protection dog program, all of their dogs on the Martin Ranch are equipped with high-dollar GPS collars that track each dog’s movement in real time. However, Walker told listeners, there are some reasonably priced GPS trackers that are just as effective if, for example, the owner/operator is simply interested in knowing if their dogs are staying on the property.

A GPS device can be simply duct taped to the dog's collar. The battery, he said, lasts about two weeks before it needs to be recharged. The hitch is that the dog has to be caught to attach the device and then caught again to retrieve the data. The data can be downloaded to a computer, and "with three mouse clicks" one can see everywhere the dog has gone over the past two weeks.

Another technology that works with a cell phone allows the operator to see where the dog is at all times in real time. However, for it to work, cell coverage is obviously needed. It too, he said, is very affordable, both in the \$60 range and purchased over the Internet.

Walker told listeners that the primary reason a dog is killed is because it leaves the property. That alone may be one of the "selling points" for these devices. He also said that producers who say they'd like to try guard dogs, and then always have a "but", that "but" is often that they're worried the dogs will stray off their property; the GPS trackers could perhaps relieve that worry.

The GPS trackers, he added, also may be beneficial in a breeding program in that it would enable the operator to better understand how the dogs work. If one dog stays shaded up at the house all day as opposed to one that diligently works the perimeter of their charge, then perhaps some changes need to be made.

Walker said they use only neutered animals, which also helps take away the desire to wander. The animals are neutered at about six months of age.

When bonding the dogs, Walker said he prefers to bond them to all sorts of small ruminants — wool sheep, hair sheep, Angora goats and meat goats. The dogs may be bonded with a single species or a combination of species.

Pups, he said, are usually ready to go to work at about four months of age.

Typically a dog goes for about \$400; a three to nine month-old bonded dog typically runs from about \$400 up to \$1000, depending on the breeder. Registered breeders, Walker said, typically charge quite a lot more.

He wrapped up his comments by telling listeners that there is no "best way" when it comes to managing and developing guard dogs.

"There are 100 different ways to make a program work. It's good to hear all the opinions, but sift through it and make it work for you," he concluded.

At the second stop on the field tour, the Jacoby Ranch, Coby Porter told listeners that they invested in livestock protection dogs out of necessity.

"We weren't going to let predators put us out of the sheep business, so we tried guard dogs, and now I'm a big believer in

them,” said Porter. “There aren’t many reasons not to get a guard dog if you feel like you have a predator problem.”

Porter and his aunt and uncle, Nancy and Jamie Roy Jacoby, partner on the sheep and lease the Jacoby Ranch from Coby’s grandfather, Roy Jacoby.

“We were having a whole lot of predation, and they weren’t killing lambs; we were losing adult ewes at a rate of one a night,” said Porter. “We had llamas, and llamas in my opinion are bloody useless.”

They decided to give dogs a try, purchasing their first in January 2016. They first bought two mature dogs from a man in Wimberley and then added two more pups. The four dogs ran with 500 ewes in two pastures. They’ve since bought six more bonded and ready to work pups, five months of age, from Bob Buchholz, whose headquarters operation is at Eldorado.

“Bonding these dogs takes some time, and you have to know what you’re doing. So my preferred way of doing it is to get bonded pups from a very reputable breeder who stands behind them,” Porter told listeners.

He recommended starting the bonded pups in the pasture with mature dogs, as the older dogs set an example.

The dogs are fed by an automatic feeder on a timer set to go off twice a day.

“We like these feeders; they’re expensive, but I think they save you a lot of money time-wise in that we don’t have to go out and feed the dogs every day,” Porter said. “We check them once or twice a week to make sure the feeders are going off.”

He also told listener that the dogs will eat dead sheep; thus finding a dog standing over a dead animal with blood all over its face doesn’t mean the dog killed the animal.

“Watch them, though. Once in a while they will do something that’s not good.”

To date Porter has bought dogs from three different breeders, and only one could really say for sure the breeding in the dogs.

“That seems to be a trend for Texas; these dogs are all crossed up.”

The pups he purchased from Buchholz are Akbash and Maremma crosses. Porter said he doesn’t really prefer one breed over another, but he opined that the Turkish breeds are a little better suited for his kind of country in that they’re “slicker haired” and thinner built.

“These dogs lend themselves really well to heat and hard country — big country where they have to cover some ground.”

They're also thought to be a little more assertive. However, given that his dogs are not "real gentle" it's a little tricky when the dogs need to be doctored. Still, he prefers it this way.

"The dogs are probably doing a better job if they're not in your hip pocket wanting a handout all the time," he opined.

A standard recommendation is a dog for every 150 head of livestock, but Porter said he has a lot more than that right now and he sleeps better at night. He added that while it is his personal preference to have more dogs, it also depends on how big the property is, how cut up it is and how bad the predators are.

"Obviously, the more dogs you have, the bigger the investment, but they save you so much money that they pay for themselves really quickly," he insisted.

Following the field tour, another rancher panel described their experiences with livestock protection dogs and fielded questions from the crowd. Of all the panelists, Bob Buchholz has been using dogs the longest. He and his brother began incorporating them into their sheep and goat operation in the late 1970s.

"We went to our then Production Credit Association in Georgetown, told them we were getting eaten up with coyotes and that we wanted to borrow \$1500 per dog on about five dogs to get in the guard dog business," Buchholz told listeners. "They'd never heard of such a crazy thing, but they went out on a limb and loaned us the money, and we got five dogs of varying degrees of good."

Early on they were running primarily leased country in Central Texas, mostly around Wimberley and Dripping Springs, and then south to Beeville; later Bob began using them in West Texas. In 2011 he moved 1600 meat goat nannies to North Texas in the Stephenville area.

"When we moved those nannies to Erath County, the kid crop dropped from our normal 150 to 180 percent to 120 percent, but I can still make money with meat goats with a 120 percent kid crop," Buchholz told listeners.

He's proven time and again that the dogs will work in most any situation and in areas with heavy predator populations. In North Texas, he had to run quite a few more dogs than normal and he split them into smaller groups when kidding.

"Sometimes it's a matter of tweaking what we would normally do to enable dogs to work better for a given situation."

In the 1980s and '90s there was lots of "bad dogs" in Texas — "dogs with poor genetics and bad bonding practices were used." Consequently guard dogs got a bad reputation, and according to Buchholz it was well-founded. He told listeners that it's up to anyone using livestock protection dogs to employ best management practices

to keep inferior genetics out of the gene pool. One way to do that is with a rigid culling program.

“If a dog isn’t working, get rid of it; don’t sell it to a neighbor or give it to your neighbor.”

Buchholz carries “dog treats” in his pickup. In that way he interacts with the dogs just enough to enable him to handle them when they need to be handled, and they do need to be handled, particularly when they decide to take on a porcupine or perhaps a wild boar.

“They’re trained to come to me, but when a deer hunter drives by, they pay them no attention whatsoever.”

Raising them in this manner also makes it easier for those who buy dogs from him to handle them.

He checks his dogs when he’s out checking livestock and water, typically once or twice a week.

“If I don’t see a dog, there’s a chance there’s a goat hung up in the fence or a sick ewe, and that dog is laid out next to that animal.”

Buchholz runs his livestock in a one-herd rotational system, which makes it easier for his dogs to do their job. For those who don’t run a one-herd rotational system, he recommended, when possible, to at least, concentrate livestock during lambing and kidding.

He added that these dogs are “pretty good” about establishing a perimeter around the flock, and just the sheer presence of these dogs causes the flock to “kind of come together.” Buchholz also does what he can to help the dogs do their job by using bells on his sheep and goats, normally about three per hundred. If the livestock become distressed, the bells go to ringing, and that signals the dogs that there is a problem.

If the dogs are not staying with the flock, Buchholz told listeners it’s likely because of two things — sex and feed.

“I recommend all the dogs be spayed or neutered.”

As for the feed, he said, it could be something as simple as the quality of the feed itself, or it’s moldy or infested with insects.

“In my dog breeding career I’ve probably had to pick up six dogs, and in most of the cases it was feed-oriented.”

He recommended a good quality 21 percent protein dog food.

“Make sure they like it, and then change it up now and then.”

During the summer months the bugs and ants can be particularly troublesome, as they’re attracted to the grease in the feed. For that reason he lets the feed get down pretty low before he refills the feeders.

“I prop that door open every couple of days, but especially after a rain, to make sure there isn’t a bunch of mold in the corners or underneath, because those dogs hate the smell of moldy feed,” said Buchholz.

He also uses feeders that require dogs to push the door in to get to the feed. The feeders are also tied up off the ground about three inches, and he puts out insecticide keep the ants at bay as much as possible.

Participants were encouraged to pay attention to feed consumption. Consumption that is too little or too much is a good indicator that something may have gone awry. Perhaps coons or ravens are getting too many free meals, or if the dogs are not eating enough, something may be wrong with the feed. Buchholz pointed out that feed consumption will likely go down during lambing and kidding, as the dogs may be picking up afterbirth and dead.

“One of the reasons I don’t like the automated timers is because these dogs don’t eat every day,” he pointed out. “When they do come in, I want them to eat all they want.”

In general, though, he figures a dog needs to be fed about four percent of its body weight per day.

To keep the livestock out of the feed he uses a panel around the feeders that the dogs can jump through or crawl under. It sits nine inches off the ground and is about 32 inches tall.

“If the livestock figure out your system, most times it’s easier to just sell them, because they’ll train the whole flock,” he told listeners.

As for the number of feeders needed, Buchholz said it really depends on pasture configuration and the number of livestock, but generally at a minimum a feeder should be placed at the water.

“If they’re bonded correctly, when the livestock leave water the dogs leave water, so give them the opportunity to eat when the livestock go to water.”

It’s also good, he said, to have a feeder a short distance from the livestock bedding ground.

“The prevailing winds in Texas are from the southeast, so if the livestock bed in a fairly traditional manner, then I’d put one in the southeast part of the pasture just off the bedding ground.”

He also noted that it is fairly common to have a dominant dog or two that may keep another out of feeders. That’s easily resolved by having two feeders at each location, separated a short distance.

His hunters are required to fence all their deer feeders so that the feeder does not attract the sheep and goats. Consequently, most times his livestock and the dogs just drift right on by the hunters. However,

neighbors who are “raising” deer under high fence can be and have been “the biggest thorn” in his side over the last 10 years.

“The deer breeders perceive these dogs as a major threat to their deer,” said Buchholz. “If a dog crawls under a high fence, that dog is not over there running their high-dollar deer; it’s just over there messing around, and they’re going to come back home.”

That led into a discussion about liability insurance. The American Sheep Industry Association has a working dog liability policy that A&M uses. Walker told listeners that it was relatively inexpensive and that he “strongly recommended it,” though he could not provide any specifics as to what it covered. He did say the rate is dependent somewhat upon how the dogs are cared for and the situation in which they are used. The policy literature was on hand for those interested in learning more.

“The best thing is you can tell your neighbors that you purchased insurance,” Walker said. “Then if they think your dogs are causing a problem, they can let you know and you can file a claim and the insurance adjustor takes it from there. You don’t have to get involved.”

Buchholz added that his understanding is that his regular ranch policy covers the “normal stuff” pertaining to LPDs, though he admitted that an issue like a dog bite might be a little different.

There were other questions about neighbor issues. One participant said they’d had great luck with the dogs on their ranch and were considering using them on a property closer to town where there was sure to be people issues, namely pets and the like. She asked the panel if they thought that was asking for trouble.

Menard rancher Bob Rieck, who wasn’t on the panel but who has used and raised LPDs almost as long as Buchholz, answered, “Be careful.” He shared a story of one of his employees who had numerous Chihuahuas.

“The guard dogs would grab those Chihuahuas and head for the draw. He doesn’t have any more Chihuahuas.”

There was also a question about how effective the dogs are with other predators, cats for example, and several asked about birds such as black-headed vultures and caracara. Buchholz said his dogs have proven to be effective against bobcats, but he fortunately doesn’t have issues with mountain lions. As for the birds, both Buchholz and Rieck said some dogs will bark at the buzzards and some will lie by a carcass and keep buzzards off, but Buchholz suggested that if the problem is really bad, a producer may need get a special permit through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to work through Wildlife Services to trap and diminish the population. The permit is good for a year.

There were also questions about whether dogs could be used in conjunction with other predator management tools, specifically

trapping and snaring. On hand to field those questions were USDA-Wildlife Services assistant district supervisor Doug Steen and troubleshooter Marty Seden.

Seden has been trapping and snaring for sheep and goat producers in and around those who also use livestock protection dogs for the better part of 25 years. He told listeners that it's all a matter of communication.

"I'm old school and not one much for visiting. I like going in, setting my equipment, catching those coyotes and going home, but I can't do that anymore," Seden said. "I have to communicate with the people I'm working with. Communicate with your trapper and manage your dogs. If you're not managing your dogs and talking to your trappers, you're going to have problems."

Water Valley rancher Craig Demere, a participant in the day's events, told fellow producers that WS has been trapping around his dog without a problem, though admittedly, his dog climbs the fence rather than going under.

"Our trapper has caught 14 coyotes within a mile of the pasture where our dog is," Demere said. "He traps and snares, so it can be done. It's a team deal; if you have a dog, you still need a trapper."

Seden acknowledged that he's caught a dog or two in a snare.

"I show my people where my traps are, and if a dog goes missing and they can't get hold of me, they know to run my traps. That's probably where their dog will be," Seden said.

WS personnel carry a catchpole in their trucks, and Steen suggested the same for those who run dogs, as it may be needed when a dog gets caught in a trap.

WS does not use lethal methods, specifically M-44s or compound 1080 collars, in areas where there are working dogs.

"We want to help keep you all in business just like you want to stay in business, and guard dogs and trapping is all part of that," Steen concluded.

Jerry Kidd, another on the rancher panel, has been ranching fulltime southeast of Menard near London since retiring as a county Extension agent. Coyotes, he said, began coming back into his country 20 to 25 years ago. Someone gave him a donkey to try.

"Luckily, the donkey died from natural causes," said Kidd. "Then we tried a llama. If you haven't have had one, all I can say is you need to get one, because the day you get rid of it is the best thing you did," he quipped.

He backed into the guard dog deal with his Walker hound, which was more of a pet but turned into a "super good" guard dog.

“When we loaded the sheep on a trailer, this dog would chase the trailer all the way out to the highway,” Kidd told listeners.

The hound eventually met his fate on the highway via another vehicle. He was losing quite a few goats again to coyotes, so a neighbor who was running guard dogs loaned him a dog. Then about eight years ago Kidd purchased a dog.

“Now we have five dogs, and I cannot think of a situation where we’ve had any problems with coyotes since,” Kidd said.

He says he got tired of his goats eating the dog feed, so now he hand feeds his dogs every day. The dogs are trained to come to a coach’s whistle.

Keeping his guard dogs free of porcupine quills, he said, is his biggest problem.

“I cannot train one to stay off a porcupine.”

Also on the panel, Richard Cordes, DVM, of Menard Animal Clinic, echoed that same sentiment.

“After a dog bites that first one, the problem only gets worse. There will be a second and third...I pulled over 3000 quills out of one dog, and it was about the sixth time I’d pulled quills out of him.”

Cordes, who has been a veterinarian in Menard since 1978, also used to be in the sheep business. He’s now getting back into the business with his brother, who operates at Mertzon. They’ve recently started using guard dogs. He was on hand to further discuss vaccinations and other health protocols for guard dogs.

Guard dogs, he told listeners, tend to be healthy animals with few problems. The normal life of a healthy one is about eight to 10 years, but operators have dogs that have survived beyond that.

As for the vaccination protocol, Cordes said there is a good combo vaccination that covers about nine different things.

“If you’re raising pups, you need to give that vaccine,” he told listeners. “Get the one with leptospirosis in it,” he added. “Feral hogs are the major thing that spread leptospirosis, and the dogs are exposed.”

On the timing of the vaccination for the pups, Cordes said the shot does absolutely no good as long as that pup has its mother’s passive immunity.

“Typically a pup starts losing that passive immunity at about six weeks of age, and 99 percent of the time by 12 weeks of age it’s completely gone,” said Cordes.

However, because there’s no way to tell for sure, he suggested vaccinating the pups starting at about six weeks, then again at nine and 12 weeks of age. The vaccine should be given every year until

about three years of age. After that, for dogs that aren't exposed to a lot of other dogs, Cordes recommended a parvo shot every third year.

“We can over-vaccinate.”

As for rabies vaccination, by Texas law a pup must be three months of age before it gets its first rabies shot. That first shot lasts a year, Cordes said; the next shot is good for three.

Parasites, he continued, are typically not a problem because, again, the guard dogs are out working and not hanging around other dogs. Fleas and ticks can be something of a problem. He recommended giving them a dog treat with a Nexgard pill wrapped within it once a month.

“That will take care of the fleas and ticks and internal parasites, too,” he said.

If a dog takes a treat, it could also be tranquilized this way. He warned to be careful when administering anesthetics.

“It takes about a third of what a normal dog would take,” Cordes said.

There was a question about rattlesnake anti-venom shots. He said that it can work well in certain situations, but the longer out the shot was given, the less effective it is because the antibodies wear off.

“I sell it; I use it, but as far as I'm concerned, the jury is out. If a dog gets bit, even if it had a shot, it still needs to be treated,” Cordes told listeners.

Jason Bannowsky, raised on a ranch in Kimble County, has been using guard dogs for about five years now and has had “good success.” He brought a different perspective to the discussion, as he makes a living buying wool and mohair. His job takes him all over the western U.S., where he has worked for years with large range operations that run 5000-10,000 ewes under herd on a combination of private and federal lands.

“I can tell you every one of those operations say they would not be in business without guard dogs,” Bannowsky told listeners. “Their herders are a big tool, too, because they're running on unfenced country on large chunks of BLM and Forest Service land, but with the herders and the dogs, they're coming back in the fall with 130 to 140 percent lamb crops.”

Bannowsky is also one of the directors of the Texas Sheep and Goat Predator Management Board, the board that oversees the funds collected for predator management through the mandatory checkoff with refund provision on the sale of sheep and goats.

Board members, Bannowsky said, have been getting more and more feedback about the importance and success that people are having with guard dogs. The board, he said, was encouraged to look

at doing more to promote the use of guard dogs. To that end the board made the decision to help monetarily support a guard dog specialist position with A&M. The plan, Walker said, is for the specialist to put together a list of Texas breeders, provide signage for those with dogs, and provide research and educational support to anyone interested in using this non-lethal predator management tool.

Bob Buchholz offered one last parting comment.

“If you’re going to get in the guard dog business, just don’t give up,” Buchholz said. “When you finally get a good dog it will be like a big sigh of relief, because you can go back to ranching and managing your livestock in the most effective manner.

“I don’t care where you operate; these dogs will work, but it’s up to you to make them work,” he concluded.

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