

Words Matter

Changing the paradigm through language.

Words matter. The words we use are key to changing paradigms for wolf recovery and stewardship of wolves by agencies. Conversely, some words currently in use are an obstacle to change.

Many euphemisms are used to describe wolves, agency actions toward wolves and state-sanctioned actions allowed by members of the public. Their frequency of use by agencies, other political decision-makers, the livestock industry, the sports hunting and trapping industry, and even by conservation groups leads the media to use the same terms. This serves to perpetuate bias against wolves and against coexistence with wolves.

The euphemisms do not accurately convey what is taking place. They prevent ethics-based consideration of what actions to take, mislead the public, and stigmatize wolves with negative moral connotations.

Other terms are used that romanticize livestock owners. This empowers an industry whose anti-wolf stance led to the near-eradication of wolves in this country and whose power continues to result in nearly all of the agency killing of wolves today.

We have identified several words or phrases we suggest be replaced. We encourage wolf advocates to always do so when speaking or writing, including in testimony, op-eds, wolf talks to the public and when speaking with reporters. If we get in the habit of doing so, it will increase the likelihood others will, as well.

We also encourage advocates to explain to reporters they work with why they're using the language they're using and ask them to follow suit.

Below is a list of some words and terms we have identified. We encourage advocates to consider whether there are other such words or phrases that would benefit from reframing.



Currently used:

- lethal removal
- lethal control
- remove wolves
- lethal removal order
- take
- lethal take

Replace with:

- kill wolves
- wolf-kill order

Why?

Despite the inclusion of the word "lethal," when the words "removal," "control," or "take" are used, this obscures the fact that the animal being removed, controlled, or taken, is being killed.

Currently used:

- harvest

Replace with:

- wolf-hunting
- wolf-trapping
- wolf-snaring
- killing wolves via hunting/trapping/snaring

Why?

The first definition of the verb to "harvest" is "to pick, gather or collect crops," though the term has also come to be used to refer to the collection of animals for human food.

Wolves are not plant crops nor are they meat sources for people. They are intelligent, sentient, sapient beings with complex family social structures.

Currently used:

- depredation

Replace with:

- predation
- livestock predation
- stock predation

Why?

"Depredation" is generally defined as "an act of attacking or plundering, pillaging and marauding; robbery; ravage. Man's inhumanity to man." "Predation" is generally defined as "the preying of one animal on others; a biological interaction where one organism, the predator, kills and eats another organism, its prey; the killing by one living organism of another for food; a flow of energy between two organisms, predator and prey."

The term "depredation" thus connotes the violence and suffering humans inflict upon each other and implies cruelty and malice. In contrast, the term "predation" refers to a biological phenomenon by which one animal kills another animal for food. Wolves are predators, not depredators. Labeling their acts of killing for food as a depredation is inaccurate and introduces a moral judgment that what wolves do is wrong.

Currently used:

- problem wolf (or wolves)

Replace with:

- target wolves or
- target area or
- conflict situation, etc.

Why?

When the term "problem wolf" is used, it completely subverts the fact that a conflict situation has arisen due to what are often multiple factors. And the factors may be quite diverse.

Examples include unprotected livestock due to a livestock owner unwilling to use deterrence measures; livestock that were protected by fladry until they were moved to a new pasture, but the fladry wasn't moved as well; or wolves drawn in by bone piles or by livestock that were already ill or injured.

These are but a few examples that show why wolves who are attacking livestock should not be labeled as "problem wolves." It vastly oversimplifies the situation, misleads the public into thinking that wolves are "the problem," and implies that by killing those wolves the "problem" will be solved.

Currently used:

- ranchers
- farmers
- livestock producers

Replace with:

- livestock owners
- livestock operators
- livestock industry

Why?

Many cultures retain romanticized and/or pastoral notions of cattle and sheep ranchers and ranching, and of dairy cow farmers and farming. This has been well cultivated through movies, TV shows, books and media. (This glorification leads to an emotional attachment that is not, oddly, similarly extended to wolf and conservation advocates.) Rather than being denoted by the romanticized terms ranchers or farmers, these individuals should be identified simply as people with businesses (livestock operators) or people who have hobby farms or keep a few livestock as pets (livestock owners).

The livestock industry has been extremely detrimental to wolf existence, conservation and recovery. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that farming and ranching are hard work and that there are people in those lines of work who are taking innovative steps to coexist with wolves. However, when these terms are romanticized, even the bad actors among livestock owners, who refuse to use conflict-deterrence measures proactively and would rather see wolves killed, may be viewed by the public through this romanticized lens.

For these reasons, we suggest using the term "livestock owners" or, in the case of commercial operations, "livestock operators." Note that "livestock owner" is a broader term than "livestock operator" and is all-encompassing, thus the simplest term to use in all cases.

Currently used:

- stakeholder group
- stakeholder advisory group
- citizen stakeholder advisory group

Replace with:

- public advisory group

Why?

In wolf-plan development processes, agencies frequently establish advisory groups composed of members of the public. All too often, agencies invite the participation of people the agency views as having a “stake” in the issue, and interpret that to mean livestock owners, hunter, trappers and conservation-group representatives.

The fact is, all residents of the state have a “stake” or interest in how wolves will be recovered, conserved and managed. Yet advisory groups are often very unevenly stacked against wolves, in that livestock owners, hunters and trappers typically share common views about wolves and “vote” as a bloc when the group as a whole discusses issues and solutions. Groups are rarely composed in an equitable manner to include non-consumptive users or recreationists; even more rarely do they include members of BIPOC, LGBTQ or other populations and communities with a similar history of lack of representation in power structures.

The use of the term citizen disenfranchises potential participants who are residents of the state but may not have citizenship. For all the above reasons, we urge such groups be called “public advisory groups” and that their composition in fact be representative of all the public.