

BUILDING TRUST

+ A GUIDE FOR AGENCIES
WORKING WITH PRODUCERS
TO REDUCE WILDLIFE CONFLICTS



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Because negative events have a much greater impact on trust than positive events, trust is much easier to destroy than it is to build. A common saying is that trust is earned in drops and lost in buckets. We can think of these recommendations as drops filling up a “bucket of trust,” with the panels of the bucket representing support agency leaders can provide to their staff when building trust with producers.



1. INTRODUCTION

Why is trust important for dealing with wildlife conflict on working lands?

Working lands are critical for wildlife, providing habitat and connecting landscapes in an increasingly human-dominated world.¹ While wildlife can provide ecological and economic benefits to landowners, supporting wildlife on private working lands comes with inherent challenges, such as livestock depredation, property damage, land use restrictions, disease transmission and threats to human safety.^{2,3} These issues can jeopardize the livelihoods of agricultural producers and can result in the conversion of land to uses that make it uninhabitable by wildlife. These human-wildlife conflicts can also lead to conflicts between producers and the agencies responsible for wildlife management. Navigating wildlife conflict often involves high-stress situations, underscoring the growing importance of trust between agencies and producers to strengthen relationships and effectively manage natural resources.⁴⁻⁷ However, trust in natural resource agencies has been declining, especially among producers, who often have lower trust in these agencies than the general public.⁷⁻¹⁰ Public distrust in agencies can lead to opposition and noncompliance, undermining wildlife management goals.¹¹⁻¹⁴ Conversely, trust can ease conflict resolution, increase support for management decisions, foster collaboration and reduce costs and is consistently highlighted as a crucial element for reducing both physical and social conflict.^{5,13,15-18}

What do we mean by trust?

For natural resource agencies looking to build trust with stakeholders, trust is the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another based on expectations that the other has positive intentions despite inherent uncertainties.⁷ Trust can differ between field staff carrying out management decisions and agency leaders who hold decision-making authority, as there are multiple levels of trust. **Interpersonal trust** is the trust between individuals based on expectations grounded in personal experience. It is strengthened through positive interactions. While producers often make the distinction between trusting an

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individual but not the agency as a whole,^{17,18} interpersonal trust can foster increased organizational trust.¹⁹ **Organizational trust** is trust in organizations and is based on perceptions of technical competency and the fairness of procedures.¹⁹ Transparent and inclusive decision-making and consistently following through on commitments strengthen organizational trust. There are also different types of trust relevant to natural resource management¹⁶ (see table to the right).

Having a **diversity of trust**

types can be useful when one type erodes after a disturbance. While a changing policy landscape can disturb procedural trust in an agency,

having affinitive and rational trust in individuals can enable collaboration as procedural trust is rebuilt. On the other hand, loss of rational or affinitive trust from individual conflict or staff turnover can be buffered by clear agency procedures to navigate interpersonal challenges.²¹

Building trust is often focused on increasing local communities' trust in agencies. However, **trust must be bidirectional**. While it can be challenging for agencies to accept vulnerability to trust producers because it requires some degree of relinquishing control, agencies must show that they trust communities they wish to engage with.²⁰ It is unfair to expect producers to be vulnerable without reciprocal behavior. Addressing human-wildlife conflict often begins with agencies harboring underlying distrust toward producers, rooted in negative assumptions about their values and intentions. Focusing on one-way trust promotes inequity and exacerbates social conflict. As Dietsch et al. (2021) describe:

*Strong resistance on the part of any partner, including conservation practitioners, to accept any degree of vulnerability—by trusting other stakeholders and treating them as equal partners—can contribute to unhelpful dynamics within processes that delay outcomes or contribute to broader social conflicts among groups over time.*²¹

Although trust-building is often framed as equal parties converging to fulfill a shared purpose, focusing on one-way trust signals a lack of interest in how agencies could better trust local people. Direct acknowledgment by agencies that trust from producers requires some level of vulnerability may improve collaborative efforts.^{20,22}

Type	Description and attributes	In the context of wildlife conflict
Dispositional	Based on one's innate tendencies and personal history. It sets the baseline for other types of trust.	Many producers distrust the government, often resulting in low dispositional trust in agencies.
Rational	Based on information and experiences that trusting the other party will benefit the trustor.	Prompt responses to conflict and kept promises increase rational trust.
Affinitive	Based on assessments of integrity and goodwill. Actions that show sincere concern strengthen it.	Staff with agriculture or rural backgrounds may find it easier to build affinitive trust.
Procedural	Based on perceptions of fair procedures through transparent decision-making and consistent rules.	Procedural trust in wildlife agencies is often valued more than technical expertise. ¹⁹



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How to use this guide

This guide is intended for wildlife agencies and others working to build trust with producers while addressing wildlife conflict. We recognize that each agency faces unique challenges, shaped by varying constituencies, wildlife, policies, capacity and funding. Accordingly, this guide is not intended to criticize agencies but rather to serve as a practical reference offering summarized recommendations grounded in research and the input of producers, agency staff, social scientists and other professionals across the western U.S. with experience working through wildlife conflict. We collected data with permission through a series of group discussions, individual conversations and survey responses and analyzed it using a qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA 2024) to identify emergent themes.

While the recommendations are divided into Section 2 for field staff and Section 3 for agency leadership, they are significantly interconnected, and we encourage staff at all levels to review insights from both sections. Section 4 outlines evaluation questions based on the recommendations. Section 5 provides references and acknowledgments that contributed to the development of this guide as well as a link to a webpage with additional resources.

2. FIELD STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines actions individuals can take to build trust with producers while working through wildlife conflict, with a primary focus on field staff. However, these recommendations are valuable for any agency staff working with producers and are not limited to field personnel. The recommendations are organized into six key areas:

1. **Engage in honest communication and actions.**
2. **Increase responsiveness and accessibility.**
3. **Share information openly.**
4. **Value and integrate local knowledge.**
5. **Build connection through meaningful interactions.**
6. **Practice conflict communication skills.**

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2.1 Engage in honest communication and actions

Have difficult conversations: Many avoid difficult conversations because they can lead to uncomfortable and tense situations. However, engaging in honest and direct dialogue demonstrates respect, minimizes misunderstandings and serves as a foundation for positive relationships needed to address wildlife conflicts. Producers stressed that distrust arises when agencies are not straightforward. Transparency about decision-making, goals, constraints, information sharing and policy changes builds credibility. Agencies must maintain open communication and provide factual information, even if it reveals limitations, setbacks or difficult truths.

Fulfill commitments and make only realistic promises: Consistently following through on agreed-upon actions demonstrates accountability, builds rational trust and reinforces confidence in agency-producer relationships. Producers appreciate when agencies not only listen but also take meaningful actions. Agencies should also avoid making promises they are unable to keep to prevent reinforcing distrust. Several producers shared experiences in which agency staff made promises to address immediate concerns but later failed to follow through, leading to eroded trust.

Be consistent in agency responses and action: Consistency demonstrates fairness and integrity. It can be difficult to build trust with someone when their responses are unpredictable and constantly changing. If agency leadership makes changes to protocols or policies that affect how field staff will respond to wildlife conflict, proactively communicate these updates to producers, ensuring they understand the reasons behind the changes and how they may be impacted.

“I think that if you have been consistent and someone has been consistent with you, even when you’re not in agreement, it makes it easier to have those conversations.” – Federal wildlife agency staff

Follow standards expected of producers: Wildlife agencies should mirror the standards they impose on producers in their own practices. For instance, a producer shared how a bull elk got tangled in a fence and died on their land. Agency staff took the head but left the carcass for the producer to deal with, raising the

question of why producers must follow certain husbandry rules (e.g., carcass removal) that the agency doesn't. In another case, an agency released bighorn sheep near a producer's sheep and required them to keep their sheep a set distance from the bighorns. Following the same precautions asked of producers demonstrates integrity and respect.

2.2 Increase responsiveness and accessibility

Respond to conflicts quickly: Finding and receiving help can reduce wildlife conflict risk. Quick responses demonstrate respect and seriousness in dealing with conflict. Many producers expressed frustration over not receiving responses when they call or email agency personnel. Returning phone calls and emails as soon as possible is essential for demonstrating genuine concern and a willingness to work together to address conflict. If immediate action isn't possible, keep producers updated, be transparent about constraints and find other ways to assist. Producers feel that agency staff "have their backs" when they provide quick assistance during conflict.

Provide accessible contact information: Contact information for agency personnel is often difficult to find. One producer recounted having to contact the sheriff because they couldn't find the appropriate person to call after experiencing their first livestock depredation. Proactively sharing contact information with producers can increase agency accessibility and also signal a sincere desire to help.

"The reason that we have a fairly positive working relationship ... is the fact that they know that we're available 24/7. If they call us, we will respond. That's the key to having a high density of large carnivores and people in the landscape. Somebody has to be available to deal with that. ... I think that plays into the mindset, too, that 'I don't have control over this, but I have outlets and other professionals that I can call when I need help.' And that's a big deal." – Wyoming carnivore biologist



Photo by Preston Keres, USGS

2.3 Share information openly

Use multiple communication platforms: Sharing information through community meetings, emails, texts and other outlets can empower producers and minimize misunderstandings. Using producers' preferred communication methods can further increase access to information. For example, while email may be more convenient for agencies, some producers may not regularly use email and prefer phone conversations or texting.

Supply timely and consistent updates: When conflicts arise, update producers as soon as possible and outline steps the agency is taking to address it. While agencies often put significant effort into resolving conflicts, producers won't know if it is not communicated. Transparent decision-making increases producers' confidence in the process, and regular updates foster reliability. Even if there is no new information to report, maintaining communication is important, as no information can create unease. Consistent communication demonstrates commitment that can enhance procedural trust.

Follow clear decision-making guidelines: Work across the agency to establish guidelines for responding to conflict. Identify areas in which adaptive and flexible approaches are needed, and clearly communicate this to producers. For example, many state wildlife agencies are struggling to define chronic depredation and when to use lethal control for wolf-livestock conflicts. This uncertainty has eroded trust, particularly among producers experiencing chronic depredations. The lengthy and often opaque decision-making process can give the impression of subjectivity, leading to concerns that wildlife agencies are prioritizing external interests over effectively stopping depredations.

"We'll let them know that they're gonna have a pack around them, but we generally don't give them the exact den location. But [we] at least keep them a little bit informed. You keep good relationships that way. People want to know that they aren't being kept in the dark and that the information you gather about animals on their property is shared with them. Early on [producers] really wanted to know where everything was at. Now, they're pretty good. ... As long as we're staying on top of it and staying there monitoring and somewhat keeping them in the loop, they're usually pretty happy."
– Carnivore biologist

Proactively share information: Sharing information demonstrates a willingness to trust producers, reinforcing bidirectional trust. In northeast Washington, producers can apply to gain access to wolf locations. While many states' wolf collar data must remain confidential due to agency policies, some biologists have built trust with producers by sharing screenshots of recent wolf locations. Sharing locations with producers also allows them to better prepare and focus on conflict reduction practices.

2.4 Value and integrate local knowledge

Understand the context and constraints of producers: Listening to producers allows agencies to better understand the unique context and challenges of each operation and helps minimize recommendations that may not be practical for all producers. One producer expressed frustration with an agency biologist who frequently points out conflict reduction success stories of smaller, and often wealthier, ranches. This may unintentionally suggest that specific conflict reduction practices are broadly applicable, which can lead to criticism of producers who are unable to adopt them.

Engage producers in two-way discussions: Encourage staff to engage producers in meaningful conversations rather than imposing top-down directives. Producers do not want to be “talked at” and appreciate two-way discussions in which their expertise is acknowledged. This approach fosters respect and makes producers feel heard. Agencies can create structured opportunities through which agency staff can learn from producers about local conditions, historical land use, and concerns and challenges.

“I found about four agency folks that would ask me questions about what was going on. The rest of them just knew what was going on because they’d read the book. They didn’t bother to come out and interview people. They didn’t bother to get details specific to the area — they had a lot of stuff to change about me.” – Rancher in Idaho

Incorporate producer insights into agency data: While the role of a wildlife agency is to monitor and manage wildlife using the best available science, producers can also provide valuable insights. Multiple producers described instances when their observations were dismissed by agencies because they didn’t align with confirmed agency observations or GPS collar data. Producers have long-term fine-scale knowledge of their land and notice changes agencies may miss. Valuing local knowledge of the land and wildlife and finding ways to integrate that “into agency data will not only improve relationships by treating producers as equal partners but can also add to the agency’s understanding of local wildlife.

*“An agency got in touch with me to go to a range riding workshop. I told them, ‘We’re interested, but we don’t want to be talked at. We want to have a conversation about what we already do and not be talked at like we don’t know anything. We have the experience on the ground. We have folks riding.’”
– Rancher in Colorado*



Collaborate with producers: Agencies can collaborate with producers on data collection and decision-making processes. Jointly monitoring wildlife through camera traps or community wildlife counts can foster a sense of ownership and promote transparency. The case study on the next page about community-led groups like the Blackfoot Challenge shows how collaboration can increase engagement and peer-to-peer learning and can balance power dynamics so that producers are valued partners. For more on place-based collaboratives, see “A Road Map to Place-Based Collaboration for Conflict Reduction” by scanning the QR code in Section 5.

“Treat us earnestly and [do] not have those automatic responses of, ‘Oh no, that’s not what you saw,’ or, ‘No, according to our population information, there couldn’t be anything there.’ Even if they don’t believe us, take us seriously and know that we’re not lying or that we’re not out just looking for attention. ... We wouldn’t be reaching out to them if we didn’t have an encounter. ... Don’t chastise us when our observation doesn’t match their data.” – Tribal rancher from AZ

Photo by Matt Collins



*Case Study***Producer collaboration with the Blackfoot Challenge***Photo by Matt Collins*

The Blackfoot Challenge, a community-led collaborative in Montana focused on supporting natural resource conservation and rural communities, demonstrates the power of cooperation between wildlife agencies, producers, researchers, conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other collaborators to manage wildlife conflicts. This initiative fosters a balanced power dynamic in which producers are valued partners. As one state bear biologist noted, once trust is established, “ranchers become, in essence, part of the bear management team,” providing critical support in complex situations, such as mitigating

conflicts with grizzlies or wolves. An example of this collaboration occurred in 2021, following a fatal bear attack in Ovando, Montana. The producer workgroup quickly mobilized to help the agency respond to the crisis. This trusted relationship, built over years, allowed swift coordination and problem-solving.

The Blackfoot Challenge illustrates how long-term investment in trust-building and partnerships can benefit both wildlife managers and producers by providing structure and enabling shared decision-making.

As the bear biologist describes, “You can kind of maintain

that trust, even when there’s regime changes. ... A lot of things that I used to do, I can still do because I’ve got these partnerships with these individual ranchers that are making suggestions and helping decisions be made. We’re all kind of working together. ... We’re hoping to get things like that established in our other big watersheds as well. But it takes a lot of groundwork.”

This collaborative model highlights the importance of local relationships and serves as a potential model for other areas with wildlife conflict.

2.5 Build connection through meaningful interactions

Connect with producers before conflicts arise: Engaging with producers early on can demonstrate sincere concern and a desire to work together, which can help establish a connection before conflict occurs. This proactive approach makes it easier to navigate difficult conversations and address challenges without the pressure of an active conflict. Proactively building relationships can create a more stable foundation for addressing future issues.

“I think it’s really important to do that sort of initial groundwork of getting to know people, by calling them and establishing a relationship well beforehand so that they know who you are and recognize your face and know where you’re from and all that kind of thing.”

– State bear biologist

Show up in person: Meeting producers in person demonstrates a level of commitment that can promote more meaningful cultivation of relationships. It can also be easier to build rapport with someone when talking face-to-face. Ask producers where they would prefer to meet, and offer to come to them. Their own environment may feel more comfortable than meeting at an agency office. Meeting at their location also demonstrates respect for producers’ busy schedules.

“For people that first get the job to start doing this kind of work, you know, they really have to get out there and ... get to know people and drink coffee with folks and find out what they’re thinking and what they know.” – State agency wildlife biologist

Check in with informal visits: Many producers mentioned how they appreciate when field staff informally stop by the ranch when passing through the area to check in with them and exchange information even when there is no immediate conflict. Conversations over a cup of coffee, walking or riding along, or even helping with chores can make the interaction feel less formal and may help some producers feel more at ease.

Engage with the local community: Wildlife managers who engage with the community beyond their official duties — such as attending or volunteering at local events — tend to earn greater trust from producers. For example, producers in northwest Wyoming expressed appreciation for agency biologists who assist with annual brandings. These informal interactions create valuable opportunities to build rapport and strengthen relationships within the community.

“Oftentimes, I’ll be out doing something, and I’ll stop and talk to them [producers] for an hour. ... It’s just getting stuff out there so you’re not hiding things, and we’ll just deal with this stuff together. That’s where I see it being really positive.”

– Wolf biologist



2.6 Practice conflict communication skills

Listen actively: While communication logistics are critical, building trust can often depend on how people communicate. Actively listening and focusing closely on what someone is saying fosters a clearer understanding of their message. Allowing them to speak without interruption, summarizing their concerns and clarifying uncertainties rather than making assumptions helps ensure they feel genuinely heard and understood. For more on active listening in the context of wildlife conflict, see pages 24 and 25 in *A guidebook to human-carnivore conflict: Strategies and tips for effective communication and collaboration with communities*.²³

Approach conflict with empathy: When someone experiences negative impacts caused by wildlife, it is important to acknowledge their loss and express genuine sympathy. Even if you haven't experienced it yourself, making an effort to empathize and see things from their perspective can help defuse tension.

Be direct about your values and intentions: Producers may hold assumptions about agency staff, especially if past interactions with the agency have been negative. Directly acknowledging this upfront and clearly stating your values and intent to help demonstrate awareness and respect.

Acknowledge and be accountable for mistakes: Mistakes are an inevitable part of managing wildlife conflicts, but they can also serve as valuable learning opportunities. Taking ownership and apologizing for errors demonstrates humility and a willingness to prioritize growth over ego. Outlining steps for improvement and following through on those commitments reinforces a genuine dedication to learning from the past and building trust for the future.

Admit when you don't have all the answers: It's OK to admit when you don't know the answers or don't have control over the situation. Saying "I don't know" is preferred by producers who appreciate direct and honest responses rather than inaccurate, vague or dismissive responses.

Check your blind spots: Take time to step back and evaluate relationships with producers. Find opportunities to identify areas for improvement. Some suggest partnering with someone who can provide accountability through honest and constructive feedback to act as an external check. See Section 4 for potential evaluation questions to assess relationships with producers.



Photo by Kim Kerns

3. AGENCY LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

This section details actions agency leadership can take to build trust with producers, both by supporting field staff and through leadership's own direct efforts. Similar to the recommendations in Section 2, these strategies are relevant to all agency staff involved in managing wildlife conflicts. The recommendations are organized into four key areas:

1. **Embed relationship-building into agency practices.**
2. **Foster understanding and respect for producers.**
3. **Support field staff in building relationships with producers.**
4. **Increase accountability through evaluations.**



3.1 Embed relationship-building into agency practices

Incorporate relationship-building into staff evaluations: Building relationships with producers is not often emphasized or encouraged by agency leadership, leaving staff to make extra efforts on their own. To embed this priority, agency leadership should integrate relationship-building into staff evaluations, such as performance reviews and promotion criteria. Additionally, recognizing and rewarding staff who excel in trust-building efforts signals that the agency values good relationships with producers.

Integrate producer relationships into conflict mitigation success metrics: Success in conflict mitigation should be measured by the reduction of physical damage caused by wildlife as well as the state of agency-producer relationships. Mitigating conflict is not necessarily successful if relationships are weakened in the process. Debriefing with producers after conflicts to discuss what worked well and what didn't could improve how future conflicts are handled.

Plan in-person meetings between agency leadership and producers: Many producers emphasize the value of face-to-face interactions with agency leadership for building trust. One Oregon producer dealing with chronic wolf depredation expressed appreciation for meeting the new state agency director in person and having their concerns heard. Direct engagement by agency leadership demonstrates commitment and sincere concern.

“The regional directors need to meet with producers and say, ‘I work here. I am in charge of all these people that are showing up at your house when you have a problem. I just want you to know who I am and that I’m approachable and that you can call me.’ ... And it’s important for them to reach out. I shouldn’t have to wait for them to come. They need to be on the ground with people having those conversations and letting them know that they are there and they care.”

– Cattle rancher in northern Montana

Hire or partner with people with relationship-building skills:

People with strong relationship-building skills, local connections or similar backgrounds are invaluable for effectively mitigating wildlife conflicts. Many producers in northwest Wyoming find it easier to trust state agency staff with ranching experience, as they have a deeper understanding of the challenges of wildlife conflict and have a realistic grasp of what is feasible for producers.¹⁸ Additionally, many staff are from the area or have lived there a long time and are trusted community members. Agencies can also partner with organizations that already have strong relationships with producers.

Improve inter- and intra-agency communication and coordination: Wildlife agencies often have differing management objectives, which can lead to varying relationships with producers and, at times, create tension between agencies. Agencies should work to address these tensions directly; ensure open communication; and establish a clear understanding of each agency’s roles, abilities and constraints. Within a single agency, inconsistencies across districts or departments can exacerbate producer frustration and can hinder the resolution of wildlife conflicts. Improving internal communication will help align priorities and clarify responsibilities. Intentional and thoughtful communication and coordination across and within agencies will improve outcomes for both agencies and producers.

“Agencies need to work well with each other to show their commitment to ranchers and farmers. We do not want to get caught in the bickering between agencies arguing [about] which agency should be stepping up to help with conflict prevention/reduction/implementation and support.”

– Montana rancher

“They [agency leadership] can continue to emphasize that their job is to help and represent the producers rather than judge them.”

– Montana cattle rancher

“They ought to have to go to a class in school about how to deal with ranch people that are actually on the land. ... And maybe there’s things we can learn. There always is. But they’ve got to have the perception that maybe our ideals can come in line with theirs. That we’re not here by mistake. We have to protect it. We have to do a lot of things that are positive towards the environment. I mean, don’t call me an environmentalist, but I am one.”

– Rancher in Idaho

3.2 Foster understanding and respect for producers

Promote a public service mindset: Many producers shared concerns that some wildlife agency staff view ranching as harmful to conservation, leading to negative perceptions of producers and, at times, condescending attitudes toward them. To bridge this gap, agencies should encourage staff to approach their roles as public servants committed to serving all constituents, including those in agriculture.

Increase awareness of economic realities: Producers expressed a desire for agencies to have a deeper understanding of the economic interconnectedness between rural industries and natural resource management agencies by addressing the misconception that rural livelihoods are solely exploitative, whereas agencies serve only a protective role. Recognizing that both rely on natural resources, with the resulting economic benefits supporting both sectors, can help foster mutual respect.

Provide learning opportunities for working lands conservation: Many agency staff lack direct experience with ranching or interacting with a producer. Agencies can foster a deeper appreciation for conservation on working lands by sharing relevant research and providing learning opportunities. Organizing ranch visits, as highlighted in the second case study, can help staff gain

an understanding of land stewardship and the challenges faced by producers, promoting empathy and enhancing their ability to work with producers.

Case study

Increasing understanding through CPW's on-ranch days

While historically, wildlife agency staff often had personal ties to farming or ranching, many staff nowadays have limited exposure to agriculture and rural life. This can impact their understanding of working lands management and conservation. To help bridge this gap, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) launched on-ranch training days in 2024, organizing two ranch visits that hosted 15 staff each. These visits were tailored by the producers themselves, offering a practical, immersive look into ranch operations, seasonal challenges and the vital role these lands play in wildlife conservation.

Ray Aberle, private lands program manager at CPW, shared a compelling anecdote illustrating the impact of these ranch visits: Prior to one of the training days, a fellow state employee expressed opposition to using grazing as a management tool on state wildlife areas during a conversation in the truck.



Photo by Ray Aberle

After participating in one of the on-ranch training days, he completely transformed his perspective and admitted how eye-opening the experience had been, acknowledging that he had never interacted with the ranching community before. This interaction provided a critical anchor point for him to reconsider his views, demonstrating the profound effect that even a single day on a ranch can have on altering perspectives and building

empathy. These on-ranch training days have been met with overwhelmingly positive feedback from CPW staff, and CPW plans to continue these visits. Although the program is in its infancy, it's clear that these ranch visits helped foster a deeper understanding of the role of working lands in wildlife conservation and can promote better relationships between the agency and producers.



Recognize producers' contributions to wildlife conservation:

Wildlife agencies can support producers by acknowledging and raising public awareness of their stewardship of working lands and contributions to wildlife conservation. Agencies can celebrate producer conservation achievements and collaborative research efforts with awards or other forms of recognition. Agencies can also amplify producers' stories through agency-led outreach or by collaborating with external organizations. Public recognition serves as a nonmonetary social incentive for further engagement in conservation initiatives and is an underused avenue for increasing intangible benefits of sharing the landscape with wildlife.²

3.3 Support field staff in building relationships with producers

Trust and empower field staff working with producers: Many producers shared how relationships with individual staff are often undermined by top-down agency leadership decisions that restrict their ability to assist producers. Producers stressed the need for field staff who are in tune with the realities of local conditions to have the flexibility and autonomy to make decisions on the ground. Leadership should empower field staff by trusting their judgment in supporting both producers and agency goals.

"So when the agencies take authority away or they require a whole chain of reporting to make any decision whatsoever, that destroys any ability of field staff to actually build any trust. ... There are thousands of examples where field staff from the various agencies have made calls on their own that have built trust and have actually made things better." – Rancher in New Mexico

Photo by Alex Few





Photo by Matt Collins

Provide staff training: While human dimensions courses are increasingly becoming part of wildlife biology curricula, this is a relatively recent trend, and many current biologists lack formal training in the social aspects of wildlife conflicts.²⁴ Although many staff have developed these skills through on-the-job experience, agency leadership can support their growth as they navigate social challenges by offering training in conflict resolution, facilitation, rural sociology and community engagement. Collaborating with conservation social scientists can help agencies identify key capacity-building areas and access tailored resources.⁵ Additionally, mentorship programs that pair less experienced staff with colleagues skilled in working with producers on wildlife conflict can provide valuable guidance and support.

Establish support channels within the agency: Provide space and foster a culture in which staff can ask for support when navigating conflict with producers. Environments in which staff are expected to be experts can stifle a growth mindset and limit opportunities for learning. Staff should feel comfortable acknowledging their limitations and seeking assistance. One-on-one check-in meetings can also provide a safe environment for sharing feedback and identifying support needs.

Strengthen staff capacity and well-being: Retaining staff who have established strong relationships with producers is critical. But managing wildlife conflicts often involves high-stress situations and a demanding schedule, leading to burnout and staff turnover and undermining trust-building efforts. Agencies should assess workload distribution to ensure fairness and provide competitive compensation and mental health support for staff. Despite financial constraints, agencies dedicated to addressing the social complexities of wildlife conflicts should prioritize hiring or contracting additional personnel. Expanding staff capacity would not only improve responsiveness to conflicts but also strengthen trust-building efforts and advance broader wildlife conservation initiatives beyond conflict management.

3.4 Increase accountability through evaluations

Establish pathways for producer input: It's essential to avoid situations in which agencies believe they have good relationships with producers, but producers feel differently. Establishing pathways for input allows producers to share their experiences, helping agencies identify strengths and areas for improvement. Engaging conservation social scientists to assess relationships with producers through interviews, surveys, focus groups or other methods can enhance this feedback process.

Partner with third-party mediators: While direct feedback from producers is essential, working with third-party mediators or organizations that have established relationships with producers can provide valuable perspectives. These external entities can offer candid feedback and suggestions, especially when historical tensions exist and relationships require repair.

Develop assessments for evaluating producer relationships: Assessments of agency-producer relationships can help identify gaps in trust-building efforts and can be used to conduct internal and external evaluations that can pinpoint areas for improvement. The next section includes suggested questions based on these recommendations that can be used to gauge the current state of relationships between wildlife agencies and producers.





Photo by Matt Collins

4. EVALUATION QUESTIONS

These questions can be asked within the agency, by external groups such as partner organizations or producers themselves. The discussion brought forth by these questions can help agencies gauge their relationships, improve shortcomings and build on strengths.

How are agency field staff building trust?

How are staff engaging in honest communication and actions with producers?

- What difficult conversations are staff engaging in?
- How are staff following through on commitments? Are promises realistic?
- How are staff being consistent in their responses and actions?
- How are staff following practices expected of producers?

How responsive and accessible are staff to producers?

- How quickly are staff responding to producers' attempts to contact? Who are they contacting?
- How quickly are staff responding to conflicts?
- Where can producers find agency staff contact information? Is it proactively being shared?

How are staff sharing information with producers?

- What channels are staff using to communicate with producers?
- How often are staff updating producers? Are producers asking for updates?
- How clear and accessible are decision-making guidelines to producers?
- Is information being proactively shared with producers?

How are staff valuing and integrating local knowledge?

- How are staff learning the context and constraints of producers?
- How are staff engaging in two-way discussions with producers?
- How are producer insights being incorporated into agency data?
- What ways is the agency collaborating with producers?

How are staff building meaningful connections with producers?

- Are staff connecting with producers before conflict occurs?
- How often are staff meeting with producers in person? In what context?
- How often are staff checking in with informal visits with producers?
- How engaged are staff with the local community?

How are staff practicing conflict communication skills?

- How are staff engaging in active listening?
- How are staff showing empathy toward producers?
- How are staff communicating values and intentions to producers?
- Are staff apologizing and learning from mistakes?
- What do staff do when the answers are uncertain and the situation is not under control?
- How are staff gauging the state of relationships with producers?

How is agency leadership supporting trust-building?

How is agency leadership embedding relationship-building into agency practices?

- Is producer relationship-building incorporated in staff evaluations?
- Is producer relationship-building included in conflict mitigation success metrics?
- How often is agency leadership meeting with producers in person?
- Are agencies hiring or working with people who have strong relationships with producers?
- How is communication and coordination within the agency and with other wildlife agencies?

How is agency leadership fostering respect and understanding for producers?

- How is agency leadership helping to promote a culture of public service?
- How is agency leadership helping to increase awareness that both producers and the agency rely on natural resources for their livelihoods?
- What learning opportunities for working lands conservation are agency leadership providing?
- How is agency leadership recognizing producers' contributions to conservation?

How is agency leadership supporting field staff working with producers?

- How much autonomy do staff working with producers have to make on-the-ground decisions?
- What training opportunities about the social challenges of wildlife conflict are available to staff?
- What support channels are available to staff working with producers?
- How is agency leadership assessing staff workload, capacity and well-being?

How is agency leadership evaluating agency-producer relationships?

- What pathways do producers have to provide input on their relationships with agency staff?
- What opportunities are there to collaborate with others who have strong relationships with producers?
- How is agency leadership assessing the state of relationships with producers?

5. RESOURCES

Author

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