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Birth control is not for everyone (or everything)

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Conservationists and wildlife managers often look for the silver bullet in dealing with human–wildlife conflicts. While most in this profession would agree there is no silver bullet, a great amount of financial and scientific emphasis has been placed on the technology of contraceptives for wildlife to appease the victims of damage caused by wildlife and the public at large. With increasing frequency, general public opinion of what should be done to solve wildlife damage often weighs heavier than the feelings and perspective of the actual victim. Agriculturists often find themselves at odds with general public opinion because agriculturists need the space and resources on their property, leased property, or public lands to maintain a successful business. The general public views wildlife existing on these lands as having nowhere else to go, and laws are passed to ensure their safety and protection from those who would otherwise reduce wildlife population numbers. Unfortunately for the investors and scientists promoting contraceptives as the new cure to wildlife damage problems, they are going to find a staunch opponent in agriculturists worldwide. Contraceptives do not solve the immediate problems of nuisance species eating crops and occupying habitat or space for livestock, predators killing livestock, or wildlife serving as a vector or reservoir for a zoonotic disease.

The number 1 problem with contraceptives as they relate to agriculture and its numerous operations is that the nuisance wildlife is still present. The same individuals or populations that caused the problems to begin with are still alive and well. Contraceptives take years before wildlife populations are curbed to levels where their damage to crops or livestock reaches acceptable levels. Farmers know they will lose a portion of their livestock or crops each year to factors they have little or no control over. However, do not expect them to sit idly by while these losses occur; they are, after all, running a business and will attempt to minimize losses. Farmers, ranchers, foresters, horticulturists, and aquaculturists alike need to see immediate results because their livelihoods are at stake. They do not run businesses that quickly rebound in the next quarter. Agriculturists generally have a short window to capitalize on, and wildlife damage, among several other factors, needs to be curtailed if they are to be successful and meet the demands of the bottom line. Contraceptives hold promise for future generations, but for now they have little appeal to current agricultural producers because the wildlife is still present, eating resources needed for livestock or the actual crop being produced.

Contraceptives also complicate issues for local wildlife managers because this approach is costly to implement, especially over large areas. The science of producing contraceptives for wildlife is still young and pricey. The labor involved with catching a specific target species can vary, but all types and techniques of traps will add considerable cost to the drug itself. Additionally, managers must also develop ways of catching a vast majority (at least 75% in species with high reproductive rates) of the target species. This involves the additional cost of accurate recording techniques and even more labor spent releasing previously tagged animals that fall into the same traps.

The practicality of contraceptives is not feasible or realistic for the agricultural industry, especially when the cost of removing the animal by most other methods (e.g., lethal control, translocation, extinction, and fear-provoking stimuli) is significantly less. Agriculture producers have a bottom line to meet in order to survive. The fact that the wildlife still remains, is still competing for resources with livestock, and still has the potential to attract predators or drive out native species will not appeal to farmers or ranchers, who need results now. As good as contraceptives sound and perform in the laboratory, they have much ground to cover in terms of reducing nuisance wildlife populations before severe damage occurs. ❇

Elizabeth K. Bingham is a native of Colfax, Wisconsin, and is a senior at Utah State University where she is studying agricultural education with an emphasis in natural resources. She also enjoys farming with her husband Cody in Idaho.