Producers with grazing livestock, particularly sheep, always must be concerned with predators. Most of the large predators were pushed out of Ohio with the arrival of early settlers. However, today’s sheep producers still must deal with the same medium-sized predators that were problems for Ohio’s early pioneers.

Predator-control methods are often limited in Ohio because many pastures are near residential areas. In addition, wildlife management rules change that may make it more difficult for predator control.

For example, the Ohio Legislature is reassessing the status of the coyote in terms of being a fur-bearing animal, which may limit how they can be trapped, even for predator control. With changing laws, sheep producers may be forced to find alternative means to manage controversial wildlife-livestock interactions.

One of these alternatives is the use of guard animals, such as llamas. The Ohio State University Extension Sheep Team has recently prepared information on using llamas for guard animals, which I have adapted for this week’s column.

The llama, not to be mistaken with the alpaca, is a large-framed, cloven-hoofed pseudoruminant (three-chambered stomach) that originates from South America. Due to their size and natural “flocking” instinct, llamas have proven to be beneficial as a guard animal in livestock production systems, especially with small ruminants.

Due to their size alone, llamas pose a threat to attacking predators. Llamas have been shown to be most effective against canine species such as coyotes, foxes, wolves and domestic dogs.

When thinking of llamas, some may remember the time that they may have gotten spit on at petting zoos, but this is not their only defense mechanism. Llamas, having an innate fear of canines themselves, will run and kick at these predators.

Due to the commotion caused by this reaction, sheep in the flock are made aware of the presence of a potential threat, which takes away the predator’s element of surprise.

A llama will often put themselves between the predator threat and the main flock, forming a protective barrier for the sheep. This presence will also have a calming effect and decrease the potential for panic by the sheep.

Llamas have also been known to be very vocal during these interactions, which may alert the producer that a predator is nearby and may be menacing the sheep.

In terms of animal interactions, you may have heard to the old saying, “If you have one, you better have two in order to keep the other one company,” regardless of the animal species.

However, in the case of guard animals, this is not always the case.

According to the authors of “Guard Llamas — A Part of Integrated Sheep Protection,” llamas perform better when working alone. Prior to flock or herd introduction, it is suggested that young llamas be first introduced to a small number of animals in a small area to establish an initial relationship.

In most cases, this process has shown to take approximately a week. However, to encourage bond development, it is recommended that animals remain in proximity for up to six weeks after the initial introduction.

When selecting which sex to use for guarding purposes, the preferred animal is a gelding (castrated male). This is not to say that males or females cannot be used, but males may attempt to breed mature sheep or goats in heat, and females will be more expensive to purchase.

One of the greatest benefits of selecting a llama as a guard animal is the minimal cost. In terms of costs associated with animal care, llamas tend to be low maintenance.

According to the 2007 National Research Council, a llama on maintenance consumes approximately 1 to 1.5% of their body weight on a dry-matter basis, resulting in a relatively low daily intake. Most llamas prefer forages (pasture or hay). Therefore, very little supplemental grain is required.

Surveys have shown that 80% of sheep producers who use llamas as guard animals said that the daily care for their flock and llama is the same. Therefore, no additional materials need to be purchased when using llamas as an integrated protection animal.

Llamas are adapted to many different environments. Because of the structure of their soft padded hooves, llamas rarely have issues with their feet as compared to other hoof animals.

Overall, llamas have proven to show positive effects when integrated into any livestock system as a livestock guard animal. However, there are cases where a llama may not be suited for your specific needs. Some llamas may require more time in terms of training than others.

If your llama does not work for the intended purpose, be sure to find a fit elsewhere for their expertise, whether that be on your operation or someone else’s. Llamas are helpful guardians, but they should be a part of a combination of control methods for predators and not the only method used.

More information on llamas as guard animals may be found at https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/e/45418/files/2020/02/Predator-Guard-Llamas.pdf

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