



Says federal regulation of the wolf population has led to attacks on livestock, driving down production, leading to dairy farms going out of business.

— *Tom Tiffany on Thursday, December 12th, 2019 in a debate*

Are wolves partly to blame for the dairy crisis? No. Tiffany misses the mark.

By *Laura Schulte on Wednesday, January 15th, 2020 at 6:00 a.m.*



A gray wolf hunts near Chewelah, Wash. (Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife/TNS).

State Sen. Tom Tiffany, a candidate for Wisconsin's open 7th U.S. Congressional District seat, has a theory about what's causing dairy farmers to struggle throughout Wisconsin: the growing wolf population.

The district, which covers northwest Wisconsin, is open after Republican Sean Duffy stepped down in September 2019. The primary is Feb. 18, and the special election will be held May 12.

During a Dec. 12, 2019, Republican debate, a panelist asked Tiffany and his primary opponent, Army veteran Jason Church, about economic growth in the state, specifically about what the candidates would do to combat the rising popularity of socialism.

In response, Tiffany spoke about "socialistic things" that happen in the federal government, among them the decision to keep wolves on the endangered species list:

"We should be able to manage the wolf population here in Wisconsin, by our own state rather than the federal government. What happens as a result of the federal government managing it? Our farmers, their cattle get harmed by it. They're attacked, livestock. Their cattle get harassed, less production. It harms their businesses. And we're wondering why farms are going out of business in Wisconsin?"

In other words, wolves play a key role in the struggles of dairy farms across the state.

In 2019, more than 800 dairy farms in Wisconsin -- many of them small, family-run operations -- closed amid a deep downturn in milk prices and other factors.

Is Tiffany right?

Wolves have long been a problem for farmers

Tiffany has made similar claims in the past about the impact of wolves on cows. In September 2016, he was one of the co-hosts of a wolf summit in Cumberland and [pushed for the delisting of wolves, because of the harm they bring to farmers and cattle.](#)

When we asked Tiffany's campaign team for backup, his staff said the information came from Tiffany's own upbringing on a dairy farm, and seeing the effect of stress on cows. The stress of predation by wolves can cause cows to lose pregnancies, lower milk production and lead to smaller weight gains, said Mattias Gugel, Tiffany's communications director.

The state's gray wolves were granted protection in 1974 under the Endangered Species Act, which prohibits the killing of any protected animal.

Since then, the population of wolves has grown in Wisconsin, reaching 205 in 1999, and growing to about 978 wolves during the 2018-2019 count, according to the [Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources](#).

The wolves have reached a point in recovery that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering removing them from the endangered species list, with a final determination to come in spring 2020, according to the [agency's website](#). That would allow wolves to be hunted.

One measure of damage from wolves is a state program that reimburses farmers for losses from verified wolf killings.

In 2018, the most recent year available, the state of Wisconsin paid out more than \$63,000 for 26 dead calves, 43 missing calves, four dead cows and two treatments of cattle by a veterinarian, according to [DNR documents](#).

That same year, 691 dairy farms closed, some with as much as \$150,000 of projected losses that year for a single farm,

according to the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#).

All told, the state's dairy industry includes 1.28 million cows on more than 7,000 farms, and accounts for a \$45.6 billion share of the economy, according to the [Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection](#).

From that perspective, the impact of killed or injured livestock is tiny.

Also, the area for wolves, mostly in northern and central Wisconsin, as shown on [DNR maps](#), seemingly overlaps little with maps of dairy operations that have closed in the last several years, which has been largely in southern and western portions of the state, according to data from the [Journal Sentinel](#).

The effects of wolves beyond just predation are hard to tell

According to a [study published by the DNR in 2007](#), it's hard to tell the actual effect of wolves on cows, because most evaluations focus mainly on predation and killings.

Other effects could include stillbirths from stress and decreased weight gain from increased vigilance, but those results were hypothetical, and unable to be properly proven without a different study, said Adrian Wydeven, one of the researchers who worked on the DNR study and a certified wildlife biologist.

"Producers may suspect and have lower rates of pregnancy and lower weights, but unless you can eliminate all other factors, it's hard to attribute some of these non-lethal impacts on livestock," Wydeven said.

He also pointed out that most studies on wolf and cattle interactions focus on beef livestock, because dairy farms often have more people moving around, and the cows are brought in several times a day for milking. That can discourage wolves in the area.

Adrian Treves, a professor with the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said dairy cattle are less affected by wolves than by other elements of their environment.

"The hypothesis of body weight loss in domestic animals exposed to wolves, as Mr. Tiffany is suggesting, has little solid

evidence worldwide although it has been mentioned for decades," Treves wrote in an email to PolitiFact Wisconsin. "Considering the vastly more costly and concerning losses of farm animals to weather and disease, Wisconsin's family farmers would benefit from attention to more important issues."

Other factors at play

There are many other larger factors at play, as the Journal Sentinel and USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin found in the [Dairyland in Distress series](#).

Among them: The long-running decline in milk consumption, the drop in milk prices paid to farmers, increased global competition and the struggle to maintain leadership in the industry, as well as more recently, the impact of tariffs and trade wars.

What's more, the number of wolves in the state started to skyrocket in the early 2000s. During that time, milk production grew steadily and continues to grow -- which itself is a factor in lower prices.

That, too, undermines the impact Tiffany places on wolves.

Mark Stephenson, director of the Center for Dairy Profitability at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said in an email to PolitiFact Wisconsin that wolves haven't come up as a factor in his conversations with milk producers.

"That isn't to say that there aren't a few farms on the edge of our wilder areas of the state where this could be an issue, but it certainly isn't a major issue for the greater dairy industry in the state," he wrote. "It is more likely to impact grazing farms on the edge of large woodland tracks, and we don't have a significant portion of our dairy industry under those conditions."

Our ruling

Tiffany claimed federal regulation of the wolf population has led to attacks on livestock, driving down production, leading to dairy farms going out of business.

But the number of cows killed by wolves is tiny in comparison to the size of the state's dairy industry, which has been battered by years of low milk prices, declining consumption and a host of global economic factors. What's more, the rise in the wolf population came amid a period of growing milk

production. And it's that over supply that is helping drive down prices.

Our definition for Pants on Fire is "the statement is not accurate and makes a ridiculous claim." That fits here.



About this statement:

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WPR, "[As Wolves Recover, Calls In Wisconsin To End Endangered Species Listing Grow](#)," December 2, 2019

Phone interview with Adrian Wydeven, wildlife biologist and wolf researcher, Jan. 7, 2020

Email exchange with Adrian Treves, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, January 3, 2020

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