BENSON

A Memorial in the Tradition of the Valley

Corrected for the Record

> *He wore an orange collar. Not a GPS collar — not the kind the county officials checked their phones for every morning over coffee. Just orange. The color of visibility. The color of I belong to someone, I am not wild, I am not a threat. He was less than a year old. He was somebody's dog. On the morning of March 18, 2025, he got loose. He did not come back.*

I. What the Valley Knew Before Benson Died

The Sierra Valley had been living inside a story for more than a year by then. The Beyem Seyo pack made their first confirmed livestock kill in January 2024. Wildlife biologists, coexistence specialists, and researchers who had spent careers studying wolf behavior said the same thing then, and kept saying it for months afterward: intervene early. Deploy deterrents before wolves learn the behavior. Fladry on the fences. Range riders with the herds. Guardian dogs. Do it now, while the pattern is still forming, while it can still be broken. Electric fencing and strategic flagging, when installed and maintained, reduce depredation by 60 to 90 percent. The science was settled. The window was open.

The window closed while Paul Roen was giving interviews.

In the grant programs the state made available throughout 2024 for exactly this purpose, ranchers in the Beyem Seyo impact area received the lowest deterrent investment in California. The total amount awarded for non-lethal tools in affected Plumas County — ground zero for Beyem Seyo activity — was $910.50. Not $910,000. Nine hundred and ten dollars and fifty cents, across one of the most agriculturally productive valleys in northern California, where more than 20,000 head of cattle grazed each summer.

The CDFW Summer Strike Team — drones, bean bag rounds, ATVs, foot presence, fladry, diversionary feeding, round-the-clock field operations — did not arrive until June 2025. A year and a half after the first confirmed kill. By then the wolves had learned. The behavior that could have been interrupted at the start was wired into the pack, passed from adults to pups like any other inheritance. When the Strike Team finally deployed its 18,000 staff hours across 114 days, it stopped an estimated 95 additional cattle kills. The tools worked. The science worked. The coexistence framework that ranching advocates had spent a year publicly dismissing as naive and insufficient — it worked. Too late to save the wolves. Too late to prevent the political machinery that would follow. But it worked.

Only 18 of the valley's ranches enrolled in the program. Out of an operation grazing 20,000 head.

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On the morning of March 18, 2025 — three weeks before Sierra County would formally declare a state of emergency over wolves — a dog got out. His name was Benson. He was brown and tan, less than a year old, around forty pounds, wearing an orange collar. He lived in Sierra Brooks — the same community where, days earlier, deputies had responded to a 911 call about a suspected wolf attacking a deer 100 yards from a community lodge. The same community where bloody wolf tracks had been found on a resident's porch, an elk carcass fifty yards away. The air was charged. The story had been building for months.

Someone saw Benson and made a decision. He was shot.

The Sierra County Sheriff's Office investigated. The conclusion was unambiguous: it was an escaped dog, not a wolf. No charges were filed. No shooter was publicly identified. No press release was issued. Benson's family filed a federal civil rights lawsuit — Wayne et al. v. Sierra County et al., Case No. 2:2025cv01113, Eastern District of California — pro se, without a lawyer, because that is what people do when they have no other option. The Mountain Messenger, which covered every confirmed wolf kill and every rancher's sleepless night, did not write a word about it.

II. The Man With Two Hats

Paul Roen is a fifth-generation rancher. He is also the Chair of the Sierra County Board of Supervisors. He serves on the California Cattlemen's Association wolf policy committee. The Beyem Seyo den was approximately one mile from his ranch. His operation reported the highest number of confirmed wolf kills in the valley — 37 cows at approximately $3,000 each, a claimed loss of $111,000. His brother's operation, Sierra Valley Ranch, was among those assisted by the CDFW Summer Strike Team. By his own accounting, Paul Roen had more to lose from wolves than any other person in the county. He was also the person who decided whether the county declared an emergency.

He declared the emergency.

From 1995 through 2024, the Erik O. Roen Family Trust collected $482,944 in federal agricultural subsidies from the USDA — the single largest federal payout to any operation in Sierra County during that period, according to the Environmental Working Group's Farm Subsidy Database. A second Roen family operation, E. Roen Ranches, collected another $125,000. Combined: $607,944 from the federal taxpayer over three decades. This is the man who stood before every camera and microphone in northern California and described an absolute massacre — a siege — an incomprehensible failure by the state to protect his community.

What he did not say to any of those cameras was that the ranchers in his valley had declined, for eighteen months, to meaningfully invest in the non-lethal tools that could have changed the outcome. What he did not say was that the compensation program he described as slow and insufficient was the same program he and his peers had resisted engaging with proactively. What he did not say was that the governmental

seat with authority to coordinate a coexistence response was occupied by the man with the largest financial stake in that response failing.

No recusal. No conflict-of-interest disclosure — not in the county record, and not in a single piece of media coverage. He told reporters his wife urged him to see a cardiologist because the stress was going to kill him. He was already building a "roadmap," he said, for other counties to plagiarize — a template for converting a wildlife management failure into a political emergency.

When speaking to an audience of ranchers and western lifestyle advocates on The Bend Show podcast — the kind of audience that does not require the diplomatic register Roen deployed for the Sacramento Bee or The Atlantic — he was more direct. "We are not going to co-habitate with these animals," he said. "They have to be removed." This was not a statement about the specific three habituated individuals CDFW ultimately targeted. It was a statement about wolves. The coexistence framework, the compensation program, the deterrent investments Roen's county declined to make — none of it was ever the goal. The goal was removal. The emergency declaration, the lobbying, the roadmap for other counties — all of it was infrastructure for that outcome.

"It's incomprehensible where we are today." — Paul Roen, Sierra County Board of Supervisors Chair, fifth-generation rancher, California Cattlemen's Association wolf committee member, recipient of $607,944 in federal agricultural subsidies, and the official who declared the county emergency.

III. The Sheriff

Sierra County Sheriff Mike Fisher spent much of 2025 standing in fields with ranchers, looking for wolves. He responded to more than 20 confirmed livestock attack sites. He attended CDFW meetings not as a neutral law enforcement presence but as an advocate for lethal management. He gave interviews to Fox 40, Fox Reno, Active NorCal, and the Mountain Messenger in which he described the situation as unprecedented, described ranchers as sleep-deprived and chronically stressed, and warned of a "public safety issue as it relates to PTSD." He traveled to Sacramento with Roen to lobby for more funding and expanded authority to kill wolves.

In April 2025 — approximately three weeks after Benson was shot — Sheriff Fisher made a statement to the Mountain Messenger that has received no public scrutiny whatsoever. He said there was "no legal avenue for protecting properties such as livestock and pets" from wolves. He said this while his office was actively investigating the shooting of a pet. He said this while his county was a named defendant in a federal civil rights lawsuit filed by that pet's family. The Mountain Messenger published his statement about the need to protect pets from wolves without mentioning that a pet had recently been shot in his county and that no one had been charged.

Fisher's office has a documented history the local press has not examined. In 2019, the Sierra County Sheriff's Office found that a deputy — Hossep "Joe" Ourjanian — had embezzled anti-crime funds from the agency. The department's own lieutenant, Kameron Crawford, led the internal investigation and recommended the case go to the district attorney for criminal charges. Instead, the county executed a "clean-record agreement." The documents were sealed. The findings were buried. The county agreed to tell any future employer that Ourjanian had "voluntarily resigned," with no red flags to report.

A year later, Ourjanian was hired as a lieutenant — eventually promoted to captain — by Del Norte County. That county's sheriff only learned the truth when contacted by reporters from the San Francisco Chronicle and UC Berkeley's Investigative Reporting Program for a 2024 statewide investigation into clean-record agreements. "Are you kidding me?" the Del Norte sheriff said when informed. The locked cabinet in Fisher's office where the sealed records are stored was photographed for the story.

Fisher spoke openly to the reporters. He said he signed the agreement when he was "new and naive" and that in retrospect he never would. He asked: "Why are we hiding behind this agreement to protect somebody who has gone out and done wrong things? At what point do we have a moral and ethical obligation — regardless of being sued or not — to stand up and say enough is enough?"

It is a fair question. It deserves to be asked about more than one situation in Sierra County.

Fisher's role in the wolf conflict was not that of a law enforcement officer responding to an emergency. It was that of a political organizer coordinating a regional campaign. In May 2025 — while Benson's family's federal lawsuit was pending and the Benson investigation remained unresolved — Fisher signed a joint letter with six other California county sheriffs opposing proposed California Fish and Game Commission regulations that would have restricted coyote killing. The letter, signed by the sheriffs of Lassen, Siskiyou, Modoc, Shasta, Plumas, Sierra, and Tulare counties, urged ranchers, farmers, and "concerned citizens" to attend a commission meeting and voice opposition. It was a coordinated act of environmental policy advocacy by law enforcement officials. Fisher did not send a comparable letter about the black bear that killed Patrice Miller.

At an industry panel in December 2025, Fisher disclosed that he had spoken with Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco — the Republican frontrunner in California's 2026 gubernatorial race — about wolf politics and predator management. He offered his assessment of which political candidates would engage with the issue and which would avoid it. A county sheriff was consulting with a gubernatorial candidate about the political valence of wildlife policy while his office had not filed charges in the shooting of a dog, had not identified the shooter, and had not issued a public statement acknowledging the case. The dog's family was still litigating in federal court.

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Fourteen months before Benson was shot, a 71-year-old woman named Patrice Miller was killed inside her home in Downieville — a short walk from Sheriff Fisher's office — by a black bear. November 2023. The first documented fatal black bear attack in California history. Miller had been having constant problems with bears trying to break into her home. She had physically struck one to keep it out. She had nicknames for the regulars. She had installed steel bars on her windows. The bear that killed her broke through her door anyway, dragged her from her bedroom to her living room, and fed on her remains for days before her body was discovered.

Sheriff Fisher responded to the scene. He fought the CDFW bureaucracy to get a depredation permit issued — a bureaucracy that initially told him the permit had to be requested by the resident of the home, despite the fact that the resident was deceased. When a CDFW biologist tried to release a trapped bear by claiming a male was female, Fisher refused, impounded the trap, and threatened to call a television station to document the release. He was right to fight. DNA confirmed the trapped bear was the killer. It was euthanized.

No county emergency was declared. There was no press tour of rural communities documenting the psychological toll of living with bears. No joint press conference with the supervisors. No lobbying trip to Sacramento. No roadmap for other counties to plagiarize.

A bear killed a woman inside her home in the county seat, a short walk from the sheriff's office. Wolves have never killed a single person in California — not one, in all of recorded state history. Sierra County declared an emergency over the wolves.

IV. What the Wolves Lost

The Beyem Seyo pack had six confirmed pups in 2025. By the time CDFW arrived with lethal management authority in October, the pack had already been paying its own losses — losses that received no coverage, no vigil, no official statement of consequence.

During CDFW field operations in September 2025, while attempting to locate and capture juveniles for relocation, biologists found the remains of two pups — designated BEY15M and BEY17M in the agency's tracking system. They were severely decomposed. They had died before the lethal operation began. The cause of their deaths was undetermined. A third wolf — a yearling — was found dead in August 2025, its death listed as under investigation in quarterly monitoring reports.

Wolf biologists understand that pup mortality rises under sustained disturbance pressure. A pack being hazed by drones and bean bag rounds, with its territory disrupted and its access to ungulate prey largely blocked while 20,000 head of unprotected cattle grazed nearby, is a pack under extraordinary stress. These wolves were being simultaneously pushed away from everything wild and pulled toward the only food source that remained abundant and accessible. Two of their pups died in that condition. A yearling died. Their deaths were not reported by the Mountain Messenger. They were not mentioned at press conferences. They were not part of the story the valley told about what the summer cost.

In October, CDFW shot the breeding pair — the mother and father of those pups, the nucleus of whatever family structure remained — along with an adult female. A juvenile male was shot accidentally; he was mistaken for the breeding male because he was the same color and similar size. The CDFW called it an unintentional lethal removal. Three surviving juveniles are being sought for relocation to a wildlife sanctuary, where they will spend the rest of their lives in a facility. The pack that had six pups in spring no longer exists on the landscape.

The Beyem Seyo pack's two dead pups, found decomposing in a field before anyone fired a shot, have no memorial. Benson also has no memorial. This is an attempt to correct that.

V. There Is No Other Side

Somewhere in the drafting of every article about the Sierra Valley wolf crisis, a reporter decided to find the balance. Wildlife advocates on one side, ranchers on the other. Urban versus rural. Environmentalists versus working families. It is a tidy frame. It is also a fiction, and the data has been saying so for years.

In a 2020 peer-reviewed study out of Colorado State University — the largest public opinion survey of its kind on wolf reintroduction — researchers found that 83.3% of respondents who identified as ranchers supported wolf reintroduction. Not 83% of environmentalists. Not 83% of Front Range urbanites. Ranchers. Gun rights advocates: above 80%. Property rights advocates: above 80%. Hunters: above 80%. Western Slope rural residents — the demographic Paul Roen and Mike Fisher claim to represent — above 79%. The lead researcher stated the obvious: "Journalists who faithfully seek to report both sides of the story make the continental divide appear to be a political divide, when in fact city dwellers and rural folks want wolves almost equally."

The rural people of the Great Lakes, the Mountain West, the northern Rockies — landowners, hunters, farmers, people whose lives and livelihoods are built on the same land these animals move through — are not, in any majority, the people performing for cameras at emergency press conferences. Most of them understand, at some intuitive and increasingly well-documented level, what wolves actually do. What wolves give back. What the absence of wolves costs.

What wolves do, for free, at zero cost to any taxpayer, is this:

They keep deer and elk moving. A herd that cannot stand still because a wolf might be in the tree line does not strip a riverbank bare. It does not eat every willow sapling before it can establish root. It does not compact the streambank soil until the cold-water fishery disappears. Recolonizing wolves trigger documented trophic cascades: increases in aspen, willow, and cottonwood recruitment; recovery of riparian vegetation; restored habitat diversity across the food web. In the Great Lakes region specifically, peer-reviewed research found that in areas of high wolf use, deer were 62% less dense, visit duration to vulnerable riparian habitat dropped by 82%, and foraging time in those areas dropped by 43%. This is not theoretical. This is measured ecological function, documented in the field.

A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences quantified the economic return of wolves in Wisconsin through their effect on deer-vehicle collisions — one of the most costly and deadly wildlife-human conflicts in North America. Wolf entry into a county reduced deer-vehicle collisions by 24%. The economic benefit of that reduction was 63 times greater than the verified cost of wolf predation on livestock statewide. Sixty-three to one. The ranchers of the Sierra Valley lost real money. Wolves, operating as an intact pack in a landscape managed for coexistence, would have returned orders of magnitude more than they took — in road safety, in watershed function, in the hunting economy, in the carrying capacity of the very grazing land the Roen family has worked for five generations.

They kill the sick. Chronic wasting disease is spreading through deer and elk herds across 36 states. There is no cure. No vaccine. It is caused by a prion — a misfolded protein that persists in soil and water for years after an infected animal dies, contaminating everything that follows. Infected animals shed prions for a year or more before showing visible symptoms, spreading disease silently through every herd they touch. Hunters know about CWD. They worry about CWD. The $20 billion annual deer hunting economy — the constituency that the Sierra County political establishment claims to protect — depends on healthy herds, and CWD is a slow catastrophe with no human remedy in sight.

Except one. Peer-reviewed modeling from Washington State University and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem found that wolves may be the single most effective available tool against CWD spread. Unlike human hunters, wolves test their prey by running it. They select for the slow, the stumbling, the confused — the animals that chronic wasting disease compromises neurologically years before visible symptoms appear. WSU's Dr. Margaret Wild, who studied CWD in Colorado for three decades, found in computer modeling that wolf predation brought CWD prevalence down to near-undetectable levels. Doug Smith, former lead wolf biologist at Yellowstone National Park, put it plainly: "Wolves are probably the single best way to stop the spread of CWD. Chronic wasting disease causes animals to act weird. Wolves kill animals like that."

The hunting economy Paul Roen's allies invoke as a constituency they protect depends on healthy deer and elk herds. Healthy herds, where CWD has taken hold, may depend on wolves. The pack framed as an existential threat to the Sierra Valley was, in any intact ecological accounting, working on behalf of everyone in it — the ranchers, the hunters, the watershed, the generations that come after.

Wolves do all of this without a budget line. Without a grant application. Without 18,000 staff hours over 114 days. Without a county emergency declaration. Without a cardiologist's appointment. Without a Sacramento lobbying trip. Without Fox 40.

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The cost of what the Sierra Valley chose — $910.50 in deterrent grants, eighteen months of inaction, only 18 ranches enrolled out of a valley running 20,000 cattle — was paid in wolves and in Benson. The pack lost two pups to undetermined causes before the shooting started. It lost a yearling. It lost its breeding pair. It lost an adult female. It lost

a juvenile male who was shot because he was the wrong color at the wrong moment. Three surviving juveniles are being sought for relocation to a sanctuary. The pack that might have regulated the valley's deer, kept its watershed intact, removed CWD-infected animals before the disease could establish itself, and returned ecological function to a landscape managed for extraction for 150 years — that pack is gone. CDFW declared the situation irreversible. The situation was irreversible because no one acted when it was still reversible.

And Benson is still dead. Shot in his orange collar, less than a year old, on a morning in March while a county emergency was in effect and a year's worth of manufactured fear had saturated every corner of the valley's consciousness. The Sheriff's Office investigated. Found it was a dog. Filed no charges. Named no shooter. Issued no statement of consequence. Then Sheriff Fisher went back to standing in fields with ranchers, looking for wolves.

The family filed their lawsuit without a lawyer. The Mountain Messenger, which covered every livestock loss and every legislative hearing, has not written a word about it.

There are not two sides to this story. There is what happened, and there is the story that was told about what happened. Benson did not die because wolves are incompatible with rural life. He died because someone built a climate of fear carefully enough, and sustained it long enough, that an orange collar on a forty-pound dog was not sufficient protection. No one has been held accountable for what that fear produced.

The wolves paid. The Waynes paid. Benson paid.

The valley is still telling itself it was the victim.

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