**Livestock Worrying podcast transcript**

Hi, I'm Will Evans. Welcome to Ahead of the Field from NFU Mutual, where we aim to bring you farming stories from around the country, updates on what's happening in the industry, and relevant help and advice.

Today, we're going to be talking about the worrying issue of dog attacks on livestock and sheep in particular. To discuss this, we're joined by Rob Taylor who leads the North Wales Police rural crime team, Debs Roberts, a Scottish farmer and co- founder of the Ladies who Lamb Facebook group for women who keep sheep, and NFU Mutual farming specialist, David Harrison.

David, I'm going to turn to you first. You've got access to the latest NFU Mutual claims statistics. What are the headlines, and what do you think the more detailed story is behind those numbers?

David: Yeah, Hi Will. Yeah, you're absolutely right. Every year for a number of years now NFU Mutual has been producing figures for the cost of dog attacks on livestock. And the headline figures for our research in 2020 is that we estimate around 1. 3 million has been paid out as a consequence of dog attacks on livestock. Sadly that's an increase of around 10% on the preceding year, which is of great concern to a number of our farming members as well. In terms of what we think the headlines are behind that, our feeling is that a lot of it is to do with the impact of coronavirus and the lockdown, with people trying to get exercise in the countryside. And, as we've known, seen the media stories of a lot of people getting dogs, pets, during lockdown and taking those animals out into the countryside and not necessarily taking the precautions they need to keep animals on a lead.

Will: Hmm. Okay. Rob, let's bring you in. Can you please explain who you are first of all and the work of the rural crime team that you head up in North Wales?

Rob: Yeah. Hi everyone. My name's Rob Taylor and I manage the North Wales police rural crime team. We were the first dedicated team in the UK, formed in 2013, and we've grown in our figures, staff wise, from initial starting three or four officers to a team of 11 now. A dedicated team dealing pretty much in the main farm- related crime and wildlife crime, and in other bits such as habitat destruction and other waste crime offenses. So broad spectrum, but mainly the rural area's our domain.

Will: Okay. Let's start with the term " livestock worrying". Exactly what do we mean by this? And does that term reflect the reality of what takes place?

Rob: No, absolutely not. You know, I think it's one of the words I don't like because everybody's used "worrying" all the time and it's gone... the 1953 Act, that's how old it is, we're talking about 67 years of age now, this act. So this term " worrying" has existed since then. And it doesn't portray the sheer brutality of these attacks. It's barbaric. Sheep are often maimed and have horrific injuries and sadly still live for many hours or days afterwards. And if they're highland sheep or mountain sheep, they can go unnoticed for quite a long time and suffer awful, catastrophic injuries where ultimately they'll either die of natural causes or be euthanized by a vet.

Will: Yeah. David's given us an overview of the national trends. What's your experience in North Wales? I mean, I'm a livestock farmer in North Wales myself and it certainly feels like it's happening more than it ever has before.

Rob: Yeah. Well, I think, not just North Wales, right. I chair the National Livestock Committee for the National Police Chiefs' Council so I've got a really good overview of the UK as well, but of course I've got very good knowledge of North Wales. And what David was saying before is interesting but it only scratches the surface because those statistics only relate to claims. So how many farmers aren't insured, or how many farmers actually don't report? This has been a historical problem with ourselves where the Home Office, the UK, the Home Office don't require the police to record these figures. So before we voluntarily started recording them in 2013, there were no figures existed anywhere in the country, historically, for livestock attacks. We were the first to expose this. So the figures we're seeing, I would probably say, like David's statement, that it's high, 1. 3 million. You can add a significant sum on to that if you look at the real impact.

And it's not just monetary, is it? It's the mental impact this has on the farmer. It's actually, as well, looking at from the other side, it's the mental impact it has on a dog owner when their dog's either shot or euthanized. And also, and people overlook this one, hugely, it's the mental impact it has on my team who are turning out to these attacks, day after day after day after day, and seeing not only the barbaric scenes, but also the anguish, the farmer is suffering by losing possibly a breeding line or this year's stock. This is a hugely named offense and the figures are far higher than we actually realize.

Will: Yeah. So how is the work that you're doing actually making a difference on the ground?

Rob: You know, when we started this team in 2013, we started a fresh, clear canvas, and I was able to sort of look at different areas. And this is one of the big areas that came out. And, you know what, in the beginning, my belief was education. You know, let's go for education, teach these dog owners about responsible dog ownership. And that still exists to some extent. But, actually, people still don't listen. And if you look at the statistics as well, cause we've gathered four other forces nationally to help us with some figures in 2018 were supplied. And these figures they show that it's not just North Wales is getting hit by these, it's all over the country. And of course, these figures are showing in excess of 75% of attacks are when the dog owner is not present.

So this isn't just dog owners not using leads. These are dog owners who are purchasing dogs, leaving them in the yard all day or the house. They're escaping and going out to nearby fields. So you're looking at conurbation of houses that's near arable or rural land. The dogs are getting into that land and they're doing the attack and going home. And sometimes the owner is not even aware that these dogs have done the attack. And, of course, you add that to the fact that three or four years ago there was a massive increase in people buying Husky dogs, whether that was due to a certain TV series and people got a fanatical look on it, and people started buying Huskies. And we were seeing over a hundred attacks a year in North Wales alone. We were seeing nearly in excess of 50% of those were committed by Huskies. So it's an interesting... the whole concept's so interesting, but it's so devastating as well.

Will: Absolutely. So what would your advice be for farmers, and what should the public do if they see an attack taking place?

Rob: You know, our advice has been from day one. If it's not reported, it never happened. Because if we don't know about it, we can't act on it. And I need not only the report to prosecute possible offenders so they don't repeat offend, but I need those figures to be able to help me with my drive at the moment, to get this law, this antiquated law from 1953, which I'm sure served a purpose eight years after the end of the second world war, but certainly doesn't serve a purpose in 2020. So I need those figures and they're absolutely vital to me. And the work that we're progressing through Parliament now is advancing at speed and I'm really hopeful we can get a change, and let's bring this act to 2020. Because what I said earlier is really important. Education works to a certain extent. But if people aren't listening, where do you go from there?

You need that result in the end of the day. And sadly, if somebody has to go to court and receive a fine, or they have to pay substantial compensation, or their dogs have to be euthanized and all that, well, so be it. And I've always likened it to the drink drive law, or seatbelt law, or people driving on the phone law. When these laws came into being, education was the first primary attack, and it didn't work. People weren't listening, and it was still happening, and people were still crashing cars. And then suddenly, when the fines came in and the arrests and the powers, and when people driving on their phones suddenly thought, Oh, hang on, I'm going to get substantial points here on my license and a substantial fine, that's when people started listening. And that's my approach. And the tactical way I'm going to deal with this problem is that I'm going to get this law changed so we can get easier prosecution, and then let's get better fines and more conversation to farmers. And also I think people then will read these stories in the press, become educated, and that's when we'll see the drop. And until that happens, I don't think we will see a significant drop.

Will: Hmm. Thanks Rob. That's an excellent comparison. Debs. It'd be good to get your perspective now, please just introduce yourself and talk about the Ladies Who Lamb group that you've set up, please.

Debs: Thanks, Will. Yes, well, the Ladies Who Lamb UK is a closed Facebook group. So it's private to the members who are in the group. It now has more than 8, 000 members throughout the UK and a little bit further beyond. We have some international ladies as well. They are all women and they all keep sheep or have an involvement in the sheep industry, whether that be a small holder, a couple of pets, right up to thousands of ewes on the Hill. So we cover the full spectrum, not just of ownership, but also breeds. And it's a very active group. They're very dynamic. We're getting about 90 to 95% engagement, which is likes, comments, and posts being made on the group. And we can be looking at anywhere between 70 and a hundred posts a day. So it's fairly dynamic and yeah, it takes a lot to look after, but they're a super group.

Will: So how did it initially come about, the group?

Debs: It's basically... my daughter and I started the group in January 2019. So it's not very old. We've only just had our second birthday and it's just grown from one thing to the next. Jess is my daughter. We started it because she was heading off on a contract lambing job. And it just occurred to us, there's a lot of potentially young shepherdesses out there who are working in very isolated conditions, maybe working at night, working alone, and they didn't have very much of a support network. So we set the group up and didn't really have any expectations where it was going and it's just gone crazy. So it's now become the safe place, if you like, for not just animal advice, I mean, we get so many questions about, Oh, I've got you down with twin lambs, What do I do? Or too, really basic questions. Like, I think my ewe's lambing, is she? Is she not? How do I save this lamb?

So just hands- on advice, but also it's become a social player base. So they share a lot of pictures and the worries and the wonders of owning sheep. And we know that there's a lot of both.

Will: Yeah.

Debs: And it's become a mental support group as well. We have a rule where you've got to be kind and that's a really important. That's probably one of the cruxes of the group, that we don't really like to have any nastiness. It doesn't matter how emotional we get, and we've certainly seen a lot of ups and downs over the last year. And I can read the patterns, I can see when people are starting to get nervy or overly emotional, or stressed, because that comes through in the type of posts. And almost instantly, you can see the support, " it's okay", " we're all feeling like that" or " this is what I've done to cheer myself up today".

So it's a really dynamic group. We have lots of different initiatives happening, but the key one at the moment that is really feels like it's at crisis point, and the ladies are very passionate about this, and hence I'm starting to talk to people and trying to raise awareness about dog attacks and responsible access when you go out to visit the countryside. What is it that we need or we would love to see people do to help reduce the panic and the stress, and the damage that's caused when dog incidents go wrong?

Will: Yeah. So what's the experience of those in the group of dog attacks on livestock?

Debs: I've got a number of different stories to tell you. I've got lots of gruesome photographs as well, but we're lucky we can't see them in this forum because it's not a nice thing to go through. But we've had stories coming from all over the country. So it's not really... there's not one hotspot, can I say? But it's definitely rural. But we're talking anywhere from Doncaster to Bristol to Cheltenham. You know, Wales, Cumbria, just everywhere, there are stories popping up. And it does feel like that every day we turn on social media and there's another story.

But if I can tell you a couple just briefly. So we had Harry who was a Hogget and this was near Bristol. There was a small flock and Harry, the whole gut was actually torn, his throat was torn apart. There was five dogs that were racing through the flock. And after 200 bite wounds on this animal, he had to be put to sleep. So that's, that's one story.

In Oxfordshire, I had a lady call me and say that she'd had some ewes drowned after they'd been chased into a river, but she wasn't able to identify who had done that because there wasn't any evidence. It was just that they'd, on checking the stock, they'd found the ewes panicked. It looked like they'd been rushed and panicked into a corner, and then down the banking and couldn't escape.

From Cornwall, and this was actually a National Trust property. So it's a rented farmer and they have a number of different operations. But one of the most worrying stories that I was told was that there was a group of tourists. So these were people who'd come from London. And there was six adults, five children, and four dogs in a group. And they were walking through a field that is well away from the public path or the National Trust part so there was no signposts anywhere to say this is where you go. They had actually ignored those signs and gone off piste completely. And the tenant farmer, they have to manage their land differently. And this is sometimes an undervalued impact of livestock worrying. And we've seen this coming, emerging as a pattern that where there are incidents of dog problems or other public access problems, that the farmers have to, to just reduce the incidents and the impact, they move their stock away.

So that means that they're rendered with fields that they can't use because the risk is too high. And that has a different impact, which is never measured. But in this situation, they had this family, extended family were walking through a field that had recently- calved Belted Galloway cows through it. And the cows were always put in this field because there was not meant to be any public go there. So therefore it was a safer place for the animals. And it meant that the public who were meant to be keeping to the path, the signposted path, weren't going to be put in a dangerous situation.

The family had ignored the signs, had gone into the field with the cows, and the farmer was very lucky to have noticed them and ran, screaming up the field, trying to pull them back in case they were hurt. So they only just managed to call them back and save them, not just from the cows, but also the calves from being disturbed as well. So, that was a fortunate incident where they managed to see it. It was just by pure chance.

Will: Yeah. And Rob talked about the mental impact that this kind of incident can have on farmers. What kind of response are you getting in that regard from members of the group?

Debs: It's actually very distressing. I've had women in tears and this happens... It's not just at the time, it can take days or weeks. It's almost sometimes like that the vision of what they're seeing can't leave them. They feel terrible guilt because this is an animal that they likely know personally, they've maybe hand reared it, or they know their flocks very well. So they're very close to their animals and they often feel more like pets than what they do a random head in a flock of a thousand. So there is a very personal feeling of responsibility and the fact that you've let them down, you've let down that animal.

But also, interestingly, and this touched on what Rob was saying, is that we've also spoken to vets who had to come and put animals to sleep after they've been wounded beyond being able to heal. And they get very distressed as well. So it's not just the blood, and the gore, and bones, and skin being ripped off, or faces being torn off. It's actually the fact that the animal is in pain and you can't do anything to alleviate that pain. So you feel a certain degree of guilt as well. So there's just so many aspects of it. And it's not something that goes away. It's the sort of thing that when you close your eyes at night, you see that picture in your mind.

Will: Yeah. Yeah. We know that the vast majority of livestock worrying incidents are unintentional. What would your advice be for dog owners who visit the countryside?

Debs: My advice, trying to summarize it is, taking on board the fact that there's a lot of new dog owners out there who are probably just in the stages of training their dog. So it's very important, particularly between January and May, that they use a dog lead. Even if they think they don't need one. If they go into a field, and they shouldn't, they can't see any stock, then that doesn't mean there are stock that aren't there. So I would always advise that people who were enjoying the countryside... And don't get me wrong, that's just one thing to add, is that we don't want people to not come out. That's not the message that's coming out. What we don't... we want people to enjoy the countryside, but we want them to enjoy it responsibly.

So that would be the second message, is be respectful to the wildlife, the environment, the path that you're walking on, and the people who live and work in that area. And the third thing would be to just follow the signs. You know, there's a lot of effort gone into signage and they're there for a purpose. They're there to keep people safe. And they're also to make sure that the environment and the wider sort of livestock, and fields, and farms, and businesses that are working are safe as well. So that would be my street top tips.

Will: Okay. Thanks Debs. David, let's bring you back. In as well as the NFU Mutual claims statistics, you've also done some research with dog owners. Tell us a bit about that research and what it's told you.

David: Yeah, that's right Will. Sort of tail end of 2020, coming into early 2021, we undertook some research with just over 1200 dog owners and, just picking up on what Deb said a moment ago, you know, we're all for people enjoying the countryside. I think particularly with the challenging times we've had through 2020 and 2021, I think in terms of everyone's physical, mental wellbeing, being able to get out into your local countryside and exercise is great. But exactly as Rob and Debs have already said, people have got to take responsibility for their pets.

And what we've found with this piece of research with 1200 dog owners, we've got around two thirds, almost two thirds of owners letting their pets run free in the countryside. And that's despite the fact that half of those dog owners are admitting that their dogs don't always come back. They haven't got recall of their animals when they need to. So that's, that's a real concern. And we've got to stress to people that they need to be keeping their dogs under control and on a lead, because if they do get in with livestock, we know full well the sort of problems that, that causes, the devastation of destroyed livestock impacts on farmers, the police, vets, and so on and so forth.

And also, worryingly, only 40% of dog owners in the survey accepted that their pet could cause injury or death to an animal. So there's a lot of people assuming that it's what appears to be a very docile and tame, it could be a small lap dog even, doesn't even have to be a big, more aggressive or potentially aggressive type of dog. There are people with, with smaller pets, lap dogs and toy dogs, and those animals can cause real devastation when they get in amongst livestock as well. So yeah, 40% of dog owners surveyed, obviously not accepting that their dog could cause injury.

So there's some worrying figures in that so we really need people to be responsible for their pets. And as has already been said, there are a lot of new dog owners out there. And it's probably tricky during times of lockdown and social distancing to get that dog socialized. But new owners need to be taking steps, whether it's a new pup or whether it's a dog that's been re- homed, they need to take the steps to get those animals used to being around livestock, and the steps mentioned. Particularly during this peak lambing season, they need to be making sure those animals are on leads when they're exercising them in the countryside.

Will: Yeah. So do you have any additional advice for farmers beyond what we've already heard from Robin and Debs?

David: Yeah, we've covered a lot of it already. I think as Rob mentioned at the start of the recording, people need to report these attacks. If the attack on livestock is not reported, it's as if it didn't take place, which makes it very hard for the police in terms of resources and understanding the scale of the problem. So we would definitely encourage people to report any attacks. I think as well, farmers can make good use of social media. So we've got some open, common land, just a mile or two away from where we live and the people that graze their livestock on there make good use of social media through Facebook and other means to say "livestock are going to be on the fields or on the common land from these dates". And then when the livestock leave the land, they put out another message saying that the sheep have been removed now. And then people know that they've got more opportunities to exercise off the lead.

So, yeah, reporting incidents, using social media, and as we've said as well, the importance of signage. If people are out there in the countryside and farmers have put signs up saying that are livestock in fields, that dogs need to be on leads, then take every precaution, keep your dog on a lead and make sure you're following that advice.

Will: Hmm. Okay. So, I mean, there's no shying away from it, COVID and the lockdown restrictions have affected people's behaviour and how are they are using the countryside as we've discussed. How much of an effect do each of you think this has had from your own perspectives? David we'll stick with you first.

David: Well certainly the research we've done and the impact, the 10% increase in the cost of the claims over the last 12 months, we're certain it has had an impact and we're aware, as we've already discussed, more and more dog owners, perhaps inexperienced dog owners as well, that don't understand what their dog could do. So yeah, sadly the impact of the restrictions and what have you over the last 12 months is definitely being borne out in worse statistics, both in terms of the raw numbers, the impact it's having on farmers, and those working with rural communities. So big impacts, unfortunately.

Will: Yeah. Is that something that you would agree with, and the members of the group as well, Debs?

Debs: Yes, I do agree. And I would also add that there's a great deal of frustration that seems to be simmering over because of this impact of COVID. And there's worries about bio- security and being safe from COVID in the countryside as well. But I'd also like to add that we have an opportunity as an industry here, there are more people who are exercising outdoors, and they're coming into the countryside and it's a wonderful part of the world that we wish to share. So there is an opportunity here to get some messaging that's targeted at the right audience, so that we can improve that level of antisocial behaviour that we see at the moment. And we can lead to more responsible dog owners so that everybody is happier and we have less crime.

Will: Mm. Yeah. And what about you, Rob? What do you think? Has the COVID, the lockdown, has that increased attacks do you think? Is that something that you've seen?

Rob: Yes. Well, statistically at the moment, no, because I haven't been able to get the full statistics up at the moment. But I would say that a lot more people have bought dogs and purchased dogs because, of course, they didn't have that ability before because they were going to work and now they're working from home and saying, " Oh, that's a good idea. Let's get a dog". And now, we're probably 10 months into this lockdown, on and off, so to speak. But this is when people are getting bored. It's like the people who buy dogs for Christmas and sort of by March, April are sort of bored of it. So that's my first part of it.

But my other observation is interesting, is that if you're walking your dog in Snowdonia it's highly likely you shouldn't be there. You know, if you're walking a dog in the middle of a really remote area on a coastal footpath or in a field where there's animals, and you live 10 miles away, you shouldn't be there. The problem we've got as a rural crime team now, a vast majority of our time is dealing with people who are not listening, not staying at home. So we're having to police COVID breaches rather than getting on and doing our proactive work, our day- to- day business.

So that's my twofold answer to it. Really. You know, the simple message is, few exceptions allowed, you are to leave your home and exercise from home, and return to home. If you're going to take your dog, do the responsible thing, use a lead. Of course though, the only one thing we need to remember, of course, is the advice is if you're walking your dog and you're near cattle and they start to stampede, that is when you let your dog off the lead, because otherwise, we've seen the sad consequences of people who've left the dog on the lead and cattle have stampede.

Will: Hmm. Okay. So let's try to end the podcast on a positive note. Despite the rise we've seen in 2020, and as we've discussed, we think that has been at least partly COVID related, evidence suggests that dog attack incidents were declining in some parts of the UK in recent years. How have each of you and the work of your organizations been able to make a difference? Debs, let's go to you first.

Debs: I think the biggest impact that we've had within our group is to be able to share the pain, and the concerns, and the fear, and the anguish, and using part of that to spread the message. Perhaps on a different note, so slightly off topic from dogs, is that we have also established what we call a body map, which is closed within the group, but we have a map where people offer up their location. And if somebody gets sick and can't tend their animals, then they can look on the map, see who's close to them, contact them and see if they can jump in and help them. So that's part of the network and one of the good reasons that people enjoy being part of Ladies Who Lamb.

Will: Okay, fantastic. And you, Rob, same question.

Rob: I always like to look at the big picture, and I've got a lot of optimism in regards to the work we're doing through parliament in regards to getting this law changed and helping us help the farmers and helping dog owners. That's a big one. But the other one for me really is the good news stories. In 2013, there was one designated rural crime team in the country, which was ourselves. You now look at over 25 designated rural crime teams in the country where the interest is there now to deal with the farming problems, to record these attacks, get the real picture, and make a real difference. So I'm actually looking through 2021. Now we're sat here in January and I'm looking through to the end of this year with a lot of optimism. Hopefully a law change, hopefully more rural crime teams, and let's work together and get this problem firmly put into the history.

Will: Fingers crossed. And you, David, let's finish with you.

Debs: We insure around about three quarters of UK farmers, so we've got good statistics on the scale of the problem. So we can help by raising its profile, by highlighting any trends and developments. We can also carry out research, which we've done with these 1200 dog owners to try and identify any developing trends. And really it's about getting information out there, helping people to understand that they need to take responsibility for their animals when they're out walking in the countryside. And also a lot of our work is collaborating with exactly the people we've had on the podcast today. So the likes of Debs with Ladies Who Lamb, and Rob, North Wales Police, and indeed other police forces as well. So it's about all of us working together and as Rob said, there's reason to be positive as well. So I think collaboratively working with our different hats on, then we can stamp this out.

Will: Mm. Fantastic. Okay. Thank you very much to all of you for joining us today and well done as well for the work that you do. And it's hugely appreciated by all of us in the farming community.

That's it from this edition of Ahead of the Field. From me, Will Evans, and everyone at NFU Mutual, it's goodbye until the next episode.