

Letter to the editor: Poison is killing more than the ‘gophers’

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Gophers are everywhere in Bozeman: vacant lots, pastures, and roadways. Though often referred to as “gophers,” they’re really Richardson’s Ground Squirrels. Unlike gophers, they spend their lives above ground. Whatever you call them, there’s no doubt that they cost ag producers millions. Some farmers and ranchers use strychnine to control ground squirrel populations. It’s an effective means of control and can decimate a ground squirrel population. Strychnine is also illegal for use on ground squirrels.

Strychnine is illegal because ground squirrels often die above ground, exposed to avian and mammalian predators and scavengers. The carcasses contain enough poison to kill scavengers. Bald eagles, redtail hawks, foxes, badgers, and other animals eat the carcasses, ingesting enough poison to cause mortality. Even dogs and cats suffer needless deaths after eating poisoned carcasses.

Across the Gallatin Valley, state, and intermountain west, farmers and ranchers use strychnine to illegally poison ground squirrels. I’d bet that most know that what they’re doing is wrong, and that many try to remove exposed carcasses. Unfortunately, many applicators don’t. What happens then? Adult raptors and their chicks consume the poisoned carcasses, as do other avian and terrestrial scavengers and predators. They die. What are the additive effects of illegal strychnine use across the valley? How many animals die from ingesting illegally poisoned animals?

What’s to be done? Do we consider illegal activity “business expenses?” Do we target those who misuse pesticides? Illegal applicators are killing part of the beauty and natural landscape that makes up this part of the country. There are alternatives to strychnine; many are either ignorant of these alternatives or refuse to use them. Off-label use of a pesticide is a federal crime. How do we prevent the needless killing of predators and scavengers when so many participate in the illegal application of poison?