

FERAL HOGS

When talking to hunters, landowners, farmers and land managers across Louisiana, there is probably no greater concern in the area of wildlife damage management than that of the seemingly unstoppable invasion of feral hogs across our state.

The first documented introduction of swine into what would later become the United States occurred in 1539 in Florida by Spanish explorer Herando de Soto. After that time, it was common practice for settlers to allow their domestic swine to range freely. Years later, sport hunters introduced the true European boar into the United States.

Wild boars have longer legs and snouts and larger heads than feral hogs. Coloration on young boars generally is reddish-brown with black longitudinal stripes. As the young mature, the stripes begin to disappear, and the red changes to brown and finally to black. The bloodlines of feral hogs and European boars have joined over the years, creating individuals with mixed genetic makeup.

In Louisiana, feral hogs can be found in a wide variety of habitats – from tidal marshes to timbered areas. They prefer mast-producing hardwood forests but will frequent conifer forests. In remote areas or where human disturbance is minimal, they often can be found in open ranges or pastures.

Feral hogs seek areas with cover and a dependable food supply. They are omnivorous in their feeding habits, consuming anything from grain to carrion. Heavy mast crops often will hold them in smaller areas during the fall and winter, but human disturbance and lack of food are the two greatest factors in causing them to become nomadic. Areas in our state that may never have had populations of feral hogs suddenly will begin to see the rooting and other telling signs of their presence. Other areas, where hogs have occurred in the past, may go for years without a sighting and then suddenly individuals are seen once more.

The Problem and Control Measures:

The feral hog is the most prolific large mammal in North America, and given adequate nutrition, populations on an



area can double in only four months. Sexual maturity is reached as early as six months, with sows producing two litters per year. Litter size varies with age and nutritional intake, but five to six young are produced on average.

Feral hogs cause a wide variety of damage. Their frequency around agricultural areas has led to conflicts with sugarcane, rice and corn farmers by not only their feeding habits but also the destruction of crops from their digging activities. Damage to wildlife and their habitats occur by rooting in young timber stands along with a voracious appetite for acorns and other mast crops. Farm ponds and watering holes for livestock also are damaged, although any predation on domestic stock and wildlife is a lesser problem. The potential for disease transmission, including cholera, swine brucellosis, trichinosis and bovine tuberculosis, also is a problem that occurs in many feral hog populations.

The tremendous population expansion of feral hogs across Louisiana and throughout the southeastern United States has made it necessary for control measures to be part of most landowners' management plans. Exclusion generally is impractical due to the large areas that often must be protected and the persistent nature of wild pigs in their rooting and feeding habits. At this time, the only control methods available for use are shooting and trapping.

Small traps that catch only a portion of a sounder usually will remove only the young inexperienced pigs, leaving

the older and smarter sows and boars to continue reproducing. In some cases, this is done purposely to have these animals available on an area for recreational hunting opportunities, while in other cases, it is simply the result of not understanding proper trapping techniques.

Another way to address the question for landowners is "Are you trying to manage the problem or eradicate the problem?" Managing is much easier and cheaper and provides for those recreational hunting opportunities. Eradication is more expensive and time consuming and is most likely not the final solution to the problem. Sounders from surrounding areas often will move onto areas left void by the removal of all current animals.

For any hog control program to be completely successful, it's necessary that 100 percent of the animals be removed from the immediate area. Due to the tremendous reproductive capabilities of these animals, leaving only a single sow and boar will lead to many additional offspring in a very short time. To ensure that every animal is removed, detailed monitoring is necessary at all trap sites. This does not simply mean the use of trail camera still photos that we all are accustomed to using; it means detailed real-time video images that show exactly which animals are entering and not entering any of the baited and unset traps. When video evidence shows that an entire sounder is inside the trap, the trap door is allowed to close by the use of a remote controlled device, activated by spotters in visual contact with the trap. These trapping techniques require bigger corral-type traps, capable of catching large numbers of animals rather than the smaller traps sold on the market today.

The use of smaller circular- or box-type traps certainly will catch hogs, but in most cases, they will not keep pace with recruitment into the population. The reason for this approach once again deals with the thinking that feral hogs are another recreational opportunity that provides both sport hunting and fine table fare.

Feral hogs are classified as outlaw quadrupeds in Louisiana and can be hunted at any time of the year during daylight hours. Recent legislative changes have expanded the shooting opportunities for these animals to include night hunting from March 1 through the end of August. Dogs often are used to chase wild pigs from cover, thus aiding in the effectiveness of shooting as a control option. Harassment by dogs also will drive feral hogs from areas, although their eventual return usually is inevitable.

While there currently are no repellents or toxicants registered for feral hog control in the United States, the country of Australia has approved the use of a highly effective feral hog toxicant by the trade name of Hog-Gone®. The active ingredient in this product is sodium nitrite, which is a common meat preservative used in most commercial meat operations. When ingested by hogs in rather low doses, sodium nitrite prevents oxygen cells from combining with hemoglobin, resulting in a humane death, usually within 1 ½ hours. The biggest obstacle at this time in preventing the testing of this product in the United States is the development of a satisfactory delivery system that prevents the poisoning of nontarget individuals. In Louisiana, the black bear is the main animal of concern, since they are capable of accessing any bait delivery system that would be effective for hogs.

Feral hogs have a sense of smell equal to or greater than that of the white-tailed deer. When this is combined with the cunningness these animals possess, populations almost certainly will be with us in our state, no matter how much pressure is put on eradication.

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