

The Feral Hog: Are They A Damaging Agent on Texas Rangeland?

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Rangeland is a natural resource that provides food, water, shelter, recreation, natural habitats and other benefits for wildlife, livestock, and man. Rangeland in Texas covers about 59% (about 90 million acres) of the state's land surface. Texas rangeland supports about 5,000 species of plants and many species of native wildlife such as coyotes, foxes, deer, and armadillos.

In the past 3-4 decades, a certain exotic species has been added to the picture and is invading Texas rangelands. This species is better known as "The Feral Hog." People consider the feral hog a harvestable and marketable wildlife species.

The feral hog or wild swine (*Sus scrofa*) is a member of the Suidae family. Hogs are considered 'old timers' and were introduced to the United States by early Spanish explorers. The first significant introduction of feral hogs came around the early 1500's, coinciding with European settlement. Since then, they have been increasing in population and expanding habitat on Texas rangeland. They can be found in a variety of habitats ranging from the boggy swamps of East Texas all the way to the rolling plains of West Central Texas.

There is an estimated two million hogs in the United States with Texas rangeland carrying about one million or one-half of these animals. Feral hogs occupy 185 of the 254 Texas counties. These hogs inhabit almost the same rangeland habitat as the white-tailed deer, thus ranking hogs second behind the white-tailed deer in population. One of the problems associated with this new animal resource is that if left uncontrolled, they have the ability to severely damage our rangelands, ecosystems, and wildlife habitats.

Some people consider feral hogs to be a problem for many reasons. For one, they compete directly with other wildlife for food, water, and living space. Hogs are omnivorous animals, which means their diet consist of plants, tree mast, agricultural crops, vegetative matter, and some animal matter. They tend to have a greater advantage over some native wildlife because of their ability to use a variety of materials for food items on the rangeland. This allows their diet to be more flexible than most native wildlife. The feral hog competes with many wildlife species such as

deer, javelina, squirrels, raccoons and others for limited resources.

Another reason why wild hogs are considered a problem is crop damage. Each year, the products of Texas rangeland are damaged or destroyed by the excessive rooting, digging, trampling, and wallowing activities of these feral hogs. They damage agricultural crops such as corn, wheat, rice, peanuts, watermelons, and others. Farmers hold no value for these hogs. They consider them to be a financial liability and an economic tragedy (loss).

Feral hogs also present the problem of disease transfer. These hogs sometimes carry diseases which can be transmitted to livestock as well as humans. Several diseases, like brucellosis and pseudorabies, are particularly contagious. In the past, these diseases may have helped to control the population of the wild hog and keep it in check.

These hogs also prey upon young lambs and goats as well as older livestock. They damage and sometimes destroy fences, supplemental feed and mineral supplement blocks.

On the positive side, many people consider the wild hog to be a valuable asset. Take hunters for example: Many hunters consider these hogs to be a prizewinning trophy animal. They love the challenge that these hogs present in hunting them. Land owners and leasees tend to view the hog as a source of income by means of hunting leases and good, free table meat.

When considering the impacts and effects of the feral hog, we must not overlook the relationship between man and wild hog. This relationship is considered controversial, and its effects, whether positive or negative, depend upon the attitude and view of the person affected. Hogs often damage and destroy man's crops, fields, fences, roads, transmit diseases to livestock, and prey upon young livestock. They also present a valuable source of income in the way of hunting leases.

Hunting in Texas has grown in popularity and has become well established throughout the years. Many people will pay good money just to come out and hunt on your land. The average price for a hog hunt in Texas is about \$170.00. Some landowners and leasees are making a pretty good profit from this industry, thus making their views of the wild hog a positive one. In recent years, the wild hog has gained popularity as a source of table meat. Landowners and agriculturalists are making an income

from these hogs by selling the meat, selling the live animal, or by giving it away to anyone interested.

"What can be done about these hogs"? As Joel Bach stated in the 1993 Feral Swine Proceedings, "they (feral hogs) are far too prolific, far too elusive, and located, for the most part in areas where accessibility to them is limited." The feral hog is in Texas to stay and there is no getting rid of them. So, we must come up with a solution. The solution is management. We must learn to manage these animals according to our needs. Some methods of controlling are: (1) fencing; (2) snares; (3) cage traps; (4) hunting with dogs; (5) aerial hunting [shooting hogs from an airplane or helicopter]; (6) poisoning, which is not legal anywhere in the U.S.; or just regular old (7) hunting. There are many different ways to manage these hogs.

My home is in Madison County which is located in the Post Oak Savannah vegetation region. My family owns 50 acres which has been managed poorly in the past and in which the hogs have been allowed to roam the range freely. They have torn up large sections of our pasture by their rooting, wallowing, digging, and trampling activities. They root up small sections at a time, thus disrupting the native grasses, soil properties, and water infiltration rates. Huge holes are left on the rangeland which in turn causes undesirable plants to grow back, some which are poisonous, and over time can cause erosion. My family considers these wild hogs to be a damaging agent. These hogs are invading our land. They are rooting up our pasture which damages (affects) the native grasses intended for the horses, goats, and deer. They have also damaged one of our watering holes by their excessive rooting and wallowing, and they competing with deer and other small wildlife for food, water, and living space.

We have seeded our pastures with ryegrass and oats, paying special attention to a small area in the back pasture, in hopes of increasing our deer population. A deer feeder has also been put up and it is kept full of corn. The hogs tend to flock here early in the morning and late evenings to eat. We are trying to manage/control these hogs. Since there is no closed hunting season on hogs, they may be taken by any method or means with a hunting license. Our neighbor's son has set up a cage trap on our land. This method has proven to be successful. We are also hunting as a management method of control. Several hogs have been killed by this method. We have found that the best way to live with these wild hogs is through hunting and trapping. We have had some success, but the war is not over yet.

In summary, (1) The feral hog competes directly with many wildlife species for food, water, and living space.

(2) Wild hogs are gaining popularity as a big, non-game animal with many hunters.

(3) Wild hogs damage and destroy agricultural crops, fields, fences, yards, farm equipment, prey upon livestock, and carry deadly, transferable diseases.

(4) Hogs supply man with benefits such as income from hunting leases and good free meat.

(5) Trapping and hunting are just two examples of the many different methods in which wild hogs can be managed/controlled.

(6) The feral hog is considered either a damaging agent on Texas rangeland or a new marketable animal resource.

The feral hog: What do you consider them to be?

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next survey is scheduled. It was further recommended that an interagency team comprised of representatives from the BLM, NRCS and USFS develop common methods and protocol for this assessment using the conceptual framework provided by the 1994 report Rangeland Health (National Research Council, National Academy of Science) and SRM's 1995 report New Concepts for Assessment of Rangeland Condition. (Unity in Concepts and Terminology committee).

The range personnel in these agencies are largely in agreement with this recommendation. They are concerned about the procedures that would be used, the short time to prepare for the 1997 survey and about having the

resources to accomplish the task; but they support the concept and believe it needs to be accomplished. There are issues and questions about confidentiality. NRCS data are collected on private lands and individual sampling sites must remain confidential; whereas, individual sampling sites on Federal lands would become public information. But NRCS has computers and software to store and manipulate the data and provide the output desired. All of these procedural details could be worked out. What is required is the resolve to accomplish the assessment. Somehow the administrators of the range professionals, each rung up the ladder, all the way to the highest level in the Federal government, must be convinced that this objective is worth achieving.—**Charles (Bud) Rumburg, EVP**