

Feral Swine Population Growing in New Mexico

Feral swine are a prolific, destructive hardy and adaptable mammal with a growing population across the country, including in New Mexico. The term “feral swine” is used to describe true descendants of Russian or European swine brought to this country by early explorers (particularly the Spanish), domestic swine that have been released or have escaped and returned to a wild state, or hybrids of the two.

“It has been known for some time that there were some pockets of feral swine activity in southeastern New Mexico, and we now know that feral swine are found all of the New Mexico counties bordering Texas,” said Joe Baker, D.V.M., Field Veterinarian for the New Mexico Livestock Board. “At this point it would not be too surprising to find them in almost any part of our state. This is not an animal to take lightly, as there is not much that will discourage their spread or stop their damage to crops, livestock and property.”

For producers whose livestock may come in contact with feral swine, animal health is a big issue. Feral swine are known to potentially carry many viruses and bacteria that can be infectious to domestic livestock (and wildlife), people or both in addition to internal and external parasites that can be spread to domestic species and wildlife. Of particular importance to agriculture are brucellosis, pseudorabies and bovine tuberculosis.

Cattle exposed to swine brucellosis through comingling with infected feral swine can develop the same antibodies as when exposed to bovine brucellosis, making their results on blood test very similar if not the same, Baker said. Swine brucellosis is a bacterial disease that causes abortion and stillbirth. The causative bacteria are shed in aborted fetuses and fetal fluids and membranes and can be transmitted to animals by ingestion or other contact. There is no cure for brucellosis and once infected, an animal is a carrier and potential shedder for life. Swine brucellosis is a zoonotic disease, meaning that it is transmissible to man.

Another serious disease concern is pseudorabies, an often fatal viral disease of the central nervous and reproductive systems. Signs include anorexia, agitation and intense itching. It can be transmitted by breeding and through direct contact with infected animals and contaminated feed or water. In domestic swine it can cause significant financial impact through reproductive losses as well as loss of the stock. It is not transmissible to humans, but can infect most livestock, dogs and cats as well as skunks, raccoons and other small mammals.

Although feral swine are not highly susceptible to bovine tuberculosis, animals have been found infected with the causative bacteria. The possibility exists that feral swine could serve as a reservoir host for the bacteria. The animals can also be a vector for the spread of influenza viruses.

Feral swine resemble domestic swine, with longer, more sloped snouts, more shoulder musculing and a lean body type, Baker said. They are usually brown to black, though domestic hybrids may be red, spotted or other color combinations seen in domestic swine. The undercoat is thicker and the outer coat very bristly and stiff. Boars are typically under 150 pounds and sows under 120 pounds, though although in ideal conditions they will grow to a much larger size.

Sows can reach sexual maturity as early as six months of age. Younger sows will generally have litters of four to six, while older sows can have ten to twelve. Despite a high mortality rate in young piglets, feral swine populations in a given area can double in 4-6 months. The young often have horizontal striping at birth that disappears as they grow. The animals are social and live in groups of one or more sows and their young called sounders. Young males can be found with the females, but mature boars usually live alone and joining the sounders only for breeding purposes or when food becomes scarce. Life expectancy is typically 4-5 years, though in some cases that may double.

Feral swine typically remain in dense cover during the day and become active in the evening, night and early morning hours. They are omnivores, eating almost any available food that is high in energy and protein. Their rooting and feeding can destroy planted crops overnight, and the damage they create can cause overgrowth of undesirable plants and reduction of forage for domestic livestock. Feral swine are both scavengers and predators, known to feed on carrion, aborted young and placental membranes, and the live young of sheep and goats as well as the fawns of deer. Fences are usually not much of a deterrent to their movement.

On average, each feral pig causes at least \$200 in direct property damage alone annually, said Justin Stevenson, New Mexico Feral Hog Coordinator, USDA/APHIS Wildlife Services. "That \$800 million of damage does not include disease or damage to the native ecosystem, including threatened and endangered species. They often cause severe damage to rangeland and riparian areas including stock tanks, impoundments and natural sources such as rivers and streams."

Hunting feral swine has become increasingly popular, and for some landowners, hogs are an asset rather than a liability. The animals are said to be as challenging to hunt as deer. Due to the risk of disease transmission through handling the carcasses, hog hunters should wear protective gloves and clothing when dressing and butchering their kill. It has become common for individuals to import trapped feral swine, release them on private property and sell hunts. Unfortunately this has been done without adequate awareness of the potential

consequences of feral swine escaping and moving to other adjacent properties. Many states, including New Mexico, have implemented regulations to prohibit the transportation and/or release of feral swine. For more information, please contact Dr. Baker at the New Mexico Livestock Board (505) 841-6161 or www.nmlbonline.com. For assistance with feral swine problems, landowners should contact Justin Stevenson, USDA Wildlife Services, 505-346-2640.