

WINDMILL COUNTRY: Wild hogs and cranes cause Big Country ranch damage

By Jerry Lackey

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — Wild hogs and cranes are damaging the ranching segment of the Big Country by killing baby calves and destroying fields for livestock grazing, said Winona Brewer of Ovala, just south of Tuscola in southeastern Taylor County.

"One farmer cannot make a dent in their (hog) population because a new bunch can move in at night. It is going to have to be a county and state effort," Brewer wrote in a letter to Abilene Reporter-News Editor Barton Cromeens.

In recent weeks, winter weather has been wreaking havoc on roads, but conditions are right for Texas feral hog control.

"February is a month when we really need to concentrate on control of feral hogs for a number of reasons," said Billy Higginbotham, a Texas AgriLife wildlife specialist. "With colder weather and less moisture, food supplies for feral hogs are becoming scarce, causing them to become mobile in search of forage. This makes hogs more vulnerable to control methods like trapping and shooting."

Sows that were bred in late fall will begin having litters in the spring. With the capability to have at least one litter per year with an average of six piglets to a litter, it's easy to see how the population can explode.

"Therefore, we've got this window of opportunity over the next 30 to 45 days prior to spring greenup when we need to concentrate some control efforts," Higginbotham said. "Regardless of the population out there, the economic damage can be drastically reduced by adopting best management practices."

He suggests landowners start making certain areas available to feral hogs for feeding. This practice will get them accustomed to returning to one location for food and will make it easier to implement control measures.

In the meantime, The Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech University in Lubbock reports finding evidence in feral hogs of the bacteria that causes tularemia.

Steve Presley, a zoonotic disease researcher at TIEHH, leads a team of researchers that tested about 130 feral hogs from Crosby, Bell and Coryell counties.

Of the animals tested, 50 percent of the Crosby County pigs and 15 percent of the Central Texas pigs showed evidence of current or past infection with Francisella

tularensis.

"We have found high levels of antibodies in these pigs that show they have been infected with Francisella tularensis and found that some of these pigs were actively infected with it," Presley said. "The bacteria are constantly present in animals in this area and the feral hog population, but normally it's only a small number of cases. This is a huge number of infected animals."

Presley said tularemia is a serious infectious disease caused by the bacteria Francisella tularensis. It is commonly known as rabbit fever and can be carried by rodents and wild game animals as well as mosquitoes, deer, flies and ticks.

Most human infections become apparent after three to five days, and signs include fever, lethargy, anorexia and signs of septicemia. Lesions can form on the skin where infections start. It also can enter the body if infected body fluids come in contact with the eyes, nose or mouth. In some cases, the bacteria become easily airborne, and can be inhaled, according to The Institute of Environmental and Human Health.

Presley and Brad Dabbert, associate chairman of Texas Tech's Department of Natural Resources Management, discovered the bacteria while looking for brucellosis, another highly contagious disease caused by a bacteria that infects humans when they ingest unsterilized milk or meat from infected animals or come in close contact with their secretions.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 126 human cases of tularemia are reported each year in the United States. From 2000 to 2008, only eight cases of tularemia were reported in Texas.

Regardless of the type of bacteria, Presley urged caution to anyone who may come in contact with wild animals, especially those folks who hunt or eat wild hogs.



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