

LIVESTOCK

MDC strengthens feral hog strategy

By JIM LOW

THE feral hog is becoming Missouri's public enemy No. 1. The Missouri Department of Conservation is gearing up to eradicate this destructive pest from its public land areas. Agency officials say they hope to lead the way in developing policies and techniques to reduce threats to human and veterinary health as well as the state's economic and ecological well-being.

Feral hogs, free-ranging swine without owners, have been present in Missouri since settlers let livestock roam without fences. Disease, predators and casual hunting are all that have kept feral hog numbers in check in areas where populations persist. MDC officials estimate the state's feral hog population today is between 5,000 and 10,000.

Even in small numbers, feral hogs are bad news. Their habit of rooting for food contributes to soil erosion and reduces plant diversity. They compete for food against native wildlife, such as deer, and they devour the eggs of ground-nesting birds, such as quail and turkeys. They can transmit potentially devastating diseases, such as pseudorabies and brucellosis, not to mention maladies that affect humans, including leptospirosis.

Seeing such problems associated

Key Points

- Missouri needs a new control policy to eradicate feral swine.
- Feral hogs are a threat to livestock and human health.
- MDC is planning to use aggressive control methods.

with feral hog populations in other states, the MDC began encouraging hunters to shoot the animals on sight in 1999. This approach resulted in limited success for only a few years.

Control challenges

"One of the reasons that hunting didn't work was that hunting alone is not enough," says Rex Martensen, MDC Private Land Field Program supervisor. "Hogs are intelligent animals, and they adapt quickly to being hunted. After a few are killed, the rest become extremely wary, and the effectiveness of hunting drops off sharply."

Another reason hunting does not work is the fact that it creates an incentive for a few people to ensure hogs' survival. Martensen says the MDC has strong evidence that hogs are being brought into the state illegally and released on public land. What else, he asks, could explain the appearance of



DOUBLE THREAT: Ecological damage and the threat of diseases carried by feral hogs like this Eurasian boar are leading reasons the Missouri Department of Conservation wants to eradicate the animals from its areas.

Eurasian boars in areas previously inhabited only by feral domestic hogs?

Control methods

Since hunting has not worked, the MDC is adopting a multifaceted approach similar to that used by state and federal officials in Kansas. It involves traps, sharpshooters and helicopters along

with other control methods. The MDC is working with Kansas officials and the USDA Wildlife Services to learn aerial hunting techniques. Training this spring on conservation areas in southwest Missouri will get the process started.

Martensen says feral hogs carry diseases capable of devastating the state's agricultural economy. The feral-hog-transmitted disease leptospirosis affects people as well as animals. Its flu-like symptoms make it hard to diagnose. Antibiotics cure most human cases, but about one person in 10 develops a form of Weil's disease, which can be fatal. Domestic animals can contract leptospirosis from contaminated water. The disease settles in the kidneys and can cause abortions and stillbirths. Swine brucellosis has also been found in wild hogs.

Statewide effort needed

The MDC owns or manages only about 1.7% of Missouri's total acreage, so eradicating feral hogs on conservation areas is not a solution to the problem.

"Getting rid of feral hogs on department land is the responsible thing to do to protect those areas and Missouri's livestock industry," Martensen says.

"Everyone in Missouri has a stake in getting a handle on this problem now, before it becomes a crisis."

Low is with the MDC.

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