

DECISION

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: FERAL SWINE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT BY THE TEXAS WILDLIFE SERVICES PROGRAM

PURPOSE

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Wildlife Services (WS) program, in cooperation with the Texas A&M University System, through the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate alternative approaches to managing damage caused by feral swine (*Sus scrofa*)¹ in the State of Texas (USDA 2014). The WS program, the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, and the Texas Wildlife Damage Management Association have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to conduct a cooperative program to alleviate damage caused by predators, including feral swine. The EA and this Decision will refer to the cooperative program created by the MOU as the Texas Wildlife Services Program (TWSP).

The EA documents the need for damage management in the State and assesses potential impacts to the human environment of three alternatives to address that need. The TWSP prepared the EA to determine if the alternatives could have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment. Specifically, the TWSP prepared the EA to: 1) facilitate planning, 2) facilitate interagency coordination, 3) streamline program management, 4) evaluate the potential environmental consequences of the alternatives related to the issues associated with managing damage caused by feral swine, and 5) clearly communicate to the public the analysis of individual and cumulative impacts.

NEED FOR ACTION

The need for action arises from requests for assistance received by the TWSP to reduce and prevent damage occurring to agricultural resources, natural resources, property, and threats to human safety associated with feral swine. The TWSP would only conduct damage management activities after receiving a request for assistance. Before initiating activities, the TWSP and the entity requesting assistance would sign a MOU, work initiation document, or another comparable document, which would list all the methods the property owner or manager would allow the TWSP to use on property they own and/or manage. As part of disease surveillance and monitoring programs, the TWSP could also participate in disease sampling.

SCOPE OF ANALYSES IN THE EA

The EA evaluates the need for action to manage damage associated with feral swine, the potential issues associated with managing damage caused by feral swine, and the environmental consequences of conducting different alternatives to meet the need for action while addressing the identified issues. The EA evaluates meeting the need for action under three alternatives. Appendix B of the EA provides a discussion of the methods available for use or recommendation under each of the alternatives. The actions evaluated were the use of those methods available under the alternatives and the employment of those methods by the TWSP to manage or prevent damage associated with feral swine. The standard WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992) would be the site-specific procedure for individual actions conducted by the TWSP (see WS Directive 2.201).

¹Feral swine are also known as “wild pigs”, “wild boars”, and “feral hogs”.

Initially, the TWSP developed the issues related to managing damage associated with feral swine in consultation with the Texas Department of Agriculture and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). Through the scoping process, the TWSP defined the issues and identified the preliminary alternatives. As part of the scoping process, the TWSP made the EA available to the public for review and comment by a legal notice published daily in *The Austin Statesman* newspaper from April 1, 2014 through April 3, 2014. The WS program also published a notice of availability on the APHIS website beginning on March 28, 2014 announcing the EA was available for public review and comment. WS also sent a notice of availability directly to agencies, organizations, and individuals with probable interest in feral swine damage management in the State. The public involvement process ended on May 9, 2014. The TWSP received one comment related to the public comment period and one letter concurring with the need for action and the proposed action alternative. Appendix A of this Decision summarizes the comment and provides a response.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE EA TO OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS

The APHIS and cooperating agencies are in the process of preparing a programmatic EIS to address feral swine damage management in the United States, American Samoa, Mariana Islands, United States Virgin Islands, Guam, and Puerto Rico. When the EIS is completed, the TWSP would review this EA for consistency with the material in the EIS and Record of Decision and supplement this EA, if needed, pursuant to the requirements of the NEPA, and the NEPA implementing regulations of the USDA and the APHIS.

The TWSP has previously developed nine district EAs that analyzed the need for action to manage damage associated with feral swine and other animal predators. Since the EA re-evaluated activities conducted under the previous EAs to address the new need for action associated with feral swine and the associated affected environment, the analysis in the EA and the outcome of this Decision will supersede those portions of the previous EAs that addressed feral swine. Those portions of the previous EAs that addressed other animal predators remain valid and appropriate to activities conduct by the TWSP associated with those species.

AUTHORITY AND COMPLIANCE

WS is authorized by law to reduce damage caused by animals through the Act of March 2, 1931 (46 Stat. 1468; 7 USC 426-426b), as amended and the Act of December 22, 1987 (101 Stat. 1329-331, 7 USC 426c). Management of most native wildlife in the State is the responsibility of the TPWD. Under Title 5, Subtitle A, Chapter 43, Section 43.1075 of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Code, the TPWD also has the authority to permit a landowner or their agent to use a firearm from a helicopter to remove feral swine. The TPWD regulates feral swine hunting and can issue permit for authorized hunting preserves within the State. The TWSP maintains a policy of conducting activities consistent with any management directions or plans that the TPWD has established on behalf of the State as applicable to the authorities of the TWSP.

The EA and this Decision ensures the actions of the TWSP comply with the NEPA, with the Council on Environmental Quality guidelines (40 CFR 1500), and with the APHIS' NEPA implementing regulations (7 CFR 372). The TWSP would conduct all damage management activities, including disposal requirements, consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and policies, in accordance with WS Directive 2.210.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

Based on the scope of the EA, the decisions for the TWSP to make are:

- Should the TWSP continue to conduct damage management to alleviate feral swine damage
- Should the TWSP conduct disease surveillance and monitoring in feral swine populations
- Should the TWSP continue to implement an integrated methods strategy
- If not, should the TWSP attempt to implement one of the alternatives
- Would continuing the proposed action alternative or the other alternatives result in significant effects to the environment requiring the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Feral swine have occurred in Texas since 1689 (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service 2009), and today, feral swine occur throughout the year in at least 253 of the 254 counties of the State (Wild Hog Working Group 2012). The only county in Texas not reporting feral swine is El Paso County (Wild Hog Working Group 2012). Timmons et al. (2012) calculated that approximately 134 million acres in Texas, or nearly 79% of the State, contained suitable habitat for feral swine. Using average feral swine densities ranging from 8.9 to 16.4 feral swine per square mile in the State and the availability of suitable habitat, Timmons et al. (2012) estimated the statewide feral swine population to range between 1.8 and 3.4 million feral swine, with an average of 2.6 million feral swine. In general, feral swine prefer moist bottomlands or riparian areas along streams and rivers, along with other areas associated with aquatic habitats (West et al. 2009, Stevens 2010, Hamrick et al. 2011). However, feral swine are capable of utilizing a variety of habitats in the State. Therefore, damage or threats of damage caused by feral swine could occur statewide in Texas wherever feral swine occur.

However, the TWSP would only provide assistance when requested by a landowner or manager and only on properties where the TWSP and the cooperating entity signed a MOU, work initiation document, or another comparable document. Upon receiving a request for assistance, the TWSP could conduct activities to reduce feral swine damage or threats on federal, state, tribal, municipal, and private properties in Texas. Areas where damage or threats of damage could occur include, but would not be limited to agricultural fields, orchards, farmyards, ranches, livestock operations, aquaculture facilities, industrial sites, natural areas, government properties and facilities, private properties, corporate properties, schools, parks, woodlots, recreation areas, communally-owned homeowner/property owner association properties, wildlife refuges, levees, dikes, and wildlife management areas. The area would also include airports and military airbases where feral swine were a threat to human safety and to property; areas where feral swine were negatively affecting wildlife, including T&E species; and public property where feral swine were negatively affecting historic structures, cultural landscapes, and natural resources.

ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH FERAL SWINE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The TWSP defined the issues related to managing damage associated with feral swine in Texas and identified preliminary alternatives. The TWSP also made the EA available to the public for review and comment through notices published in local media and through direct notification of potentially interested parties.

Chapter 2 of the EA describes in detail the issues considered and evaluated in the EA. The TWSP identified the following issues as important to the scope of the analysis (40 CFR 1508.25) with each alternative evaluated in the EA relative to the impacts on those major issues:

- Issue 1 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on Feral Swine Populations
- Issue 2 - Effects on Non-target Wildlife Species Populations, Including T&E Species
- Issue 3 - Effects of Damage Management Methods on Human Health and Safety

- Issue 4 - Humaneness and Animal Welfare Concerns of Methods
- Issue 5 - Effectiveness of Feral Swine Damage Management Methods

ISSUES CONSIDERED BUT NOT ANALYZED IN DETAIL WITH RATIONALE

In addition to those issues analyzed in detail, the TWSP identified several issues during the development of the EA but the TWSP did not consider those issues in detail. Section 2.3 of the EA discusses the rationale for the decision not to analyze those issues in detail.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTERNATIVES

The TWSP developed the following three alternatives to respond to the issues identified in Chapter 2 of the EA. Chapter 4 of the EA provides a detailed discussion of the effects of the alternatives on the issues. Below is a summary of the alternatives.

Alternative 1 – No Feral Swine Damage Management Conducted by the WS program

Under the no involvement alternative, the federal WS program would have no involvement with any aspect of managing damage caused by feral swine in Texas and would no longer be involved with the TWSP. The WS program would refer all requests for assistance to the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, the Texas Wildlife Damage Management Association, the TPWD, and/or other entities. The TWSP, consisting of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the TWDMA, could continue to provide assistance as described in Alternative 2 or Alternative 3. Most of the methods described in Appendix B of the EA would be available under this alternative. The only methods that would have limited availability to all entities to manage damage caused by feral swine under this alternative would be immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals. Immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals could only be available to appropriately licensed veterinarians or people under their supervision. All other methods described in Appendix B of the EA would be available to those people experiencing damage.

Alternative 2 – Feral Swine Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

Under the technical assistance only alternative, the WS program would continue to participate as part of the TWSP; however, the WS program would address every request for assistance with technical assistance only. Technical assistance would provide those people seeking assistance with information and recommendations on methods and techniques that those cooperators could implement without WS' direct involvement in the action. WS could provide technical assistance through personal or telephone consultations and through site visits. Under this alternative, those people experiencing damage would have the burden of resolving threats or damage associated with feral swine or seeking other entities to provide direct operational assistance. Those people could employ methods recommended by WS, could employ other methods, could seek further assistance from other entities, or could take no further action. The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Texas Wildlife Damage Management Association could continue to provide assistance as described in Alternative 3. WS could also refer people requesting assistance to the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Texas Wildlife Damage Management Association.

Similar to Alternative 1, methods described in Appendix B would be available to those people experiencing damage or threats associated with feral swine in the State except immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals. Immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals would only be available to appropriately licensed veterinarians or people under the supervision. All other methods described in Appendix B of the EA would be available to those persons experiencing damage and to other entities that could provide assistance.

Alternative 3 - Continuing the Current Integrated Approach to Managing Feral Swine Damage (Proposed Action/No Action)

The proposed action/no action alternative would continue WS' involvement in the TWSP and would allow the WS program to continue to provide direct operational assistance and technical assistance as part of the TWSP. Assistance would involve recommending and/or employing an integrated damage management approach using available methods, as appropriate, to reduce damage associated with feral swine in the State. Under this alternative, the TWSP would recommend or implement an adaptive integrated methods strategy that would encompass the use of practical and effective methods of preventing or reducing damage while minimizing harmful effects of damage management measures on people, other species, and the environment. The TWSP would give preference to non-lethal methods when formulating each damage management strategy, and would recommend or implement non-lethal methods when practical and effective before recommending or implementing lethal methods. However, the TWSP would not implement non-lethal methods as a first response to every damage problem. The most appropriate response could often be a combination of non-lethal and lethal methods, or there could be instances where application of lethal methods alone would be the most appropriate strategy. Technical assistance provided under this alternative would be similar to technical assistance provided under Alternative 2.

All of the methods addressed in Appendix B of the EA would be available to the TWSP for use to resolve requests for assistance to manage damage associated with feral swine in the State. Using the WS Decision model discussed in the EA, the TWSP could employ methods singularly or in combination in an integrated approach to alleviate damage caused by feral swine.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT ANALYZED IN DETAIL

The TWSP considered additional alternatives during the development of the EA to address the issues but the TWSP did not analyze those alternatives in detail with the rationale discussed in Section 3.2 of the EA.

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES FOR FERAL SWINE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

The TWSP uses many standard operating procedures that improve the safety, selectivity, and efficacy of activities to manage damage associated with feral swine. Chapter 3 of the EA discusses the standard operating procedures. The TWSP would incorporate those standard operating procedures into activities conducted if the decision-maker selected the proposed action alternative (Alternative 3) and when applicable, under the technical assistance alternative (Alternative 2), if selected. If the decision-maker selected the no involvement by the WS program alternative (Alternative 1), the lack of assistance by the WS program would preclude the employment or recommendation of those standard operating procedures addressed in the EA.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES FOR ISSUES ANALYZED IN DETAIL

Chapter 4 of the EA analyzed the environmental consequences of each alternative in comparison to determine the extent of actual or potential impacts on the major issues identified in the EA. The proposed action/no action alternative served as the baseline for the analysis and the comparison of expected impacts among the alternatives. The analysis also takes into consideration mandates, directives, and the procedures of the TWSP, the Texas Department of Agriculture, and the TPWD. The analyses in Chapter 4 of the EA indicated the potential impacts to the quality of the human environment would be similar across the alternatives.

The following resource values in Texas are not expected to be significantly impacted by any of the alternatives analyzed in the EA: soils, geology, minerals, water quality/quantity, flood plains, wetlands, critical habitats (areas listed in threatened or endangered species recovery plans), visual resources, air quality, prime and unique farmlands, aquatic resources, timber, and range. The activities proposed in the alternatives would have a negligible effect on atmospheric conditions, including the global climate. Meaningful direct or indirect emissions of greenhouse gases would not occur because of any of the alternatives. Those alternatives would meet the requirements of applicable laws, regulations, and Executive Orders, including the Clean Air Act and Executive Order 13514.

Issue 1 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on Feral Swine Populations

Under the proposed action, the TWSP could incorporate non-lethal and lethal methods described in Appendix B of the EA in an integrated approach in which the TWSP could employ all or a combination of methods to resolve a request for assistance. The TWSP could recommend and operationally employ both non-lethal and lethal methods, as governed by federal, state, and local laws and regulations under the proposed action. Similarly, the TWSP could recommend the use of non-lethal and/or lethal methods under Alternative 2; however, the federal WS program would not provide direct operational assistance.

The TWSP could use non-lethal methods available under the alternatives to exclude, harass, or disperse feral swine from areas where damage or threats were occurring, which could reduce the presence of feral swine at the site and potentially the immediate area around the site where the program employed non-lethal methods. In addition, the TWSP could use non-lethal methods to capture feral swine. The TWSP would give non-lethal methods preference when addressing requests for assistance under Alternative 2 and Alternative 3. However, the TWSP would not necessarily employ non-lethal methods to resolve every request for assistance if deemed inappropriate using the WS Decision Model, especially in situations where the requesting entity had already attempted to resolve the damage or threats of damage using non-lethal methods. When effective, non-lethal methods would disperse feral swine from the area resulting in a reduction in the presence of those swine at the site where the TWSP employed those methods. Most people regard non-lethal methods used to exclude or disperse target animals as having minimal effects on overall populations of wildlife since those animals would be unharmed. The TWSP would not employ non-lethal methods over large geographical areas or apply those methods at such intensity that essential resources (*e.g.*, food sources, habitat) would be unavailable for extended durations or over a wide geographical scope. Therefore, long-term adverse effects would not occur to a species' population. The continued use of non-lethal methods often leads to the habituation of wildlife to those methods, which can decrease the effectiveness of those methods.

When employed under the alternatives, the TWSP would use lethal methods to remove those animals that the TWSP have identified as causing damage or posing a threat to human safety. The use of lethal methods could result in local reductions of feral swine in the area where damage or threats were occurring. Under the proposed action alternative, people could request direct operational assistance from the TWSP where the TWSP employs lethal methods to remove feral swine. The number of individual feral swine the TWSP removes from the population annually using lethal methods would be dependent on the number of requests for assistance received, the number of feral swine involved with the associated damage or threat, and the efficacy of methods employed. The TWSP based the level of estimated annual lethal removal under the proposed action alternative on previous activities that the TWSP conducted to address requests for assistance. In addition, the TWSP based the estimated annual lethal removal level on additional efforts of the TWSP that could occur to address requests for assistance.

The feral swine that the TWSP removes under the proposed action other entities could remove in the absence of direct involvement by the TWSP under the other alternatives. There is currently no closed

season for feral swine in the State; therefore, any entity could lethally remove feral swine throughout the year. Therefore, direct involvement by the TWSP or the WS program does not preclude the lethal removal of feral swine by those people experiencing damage or threats or those people seeking assistance with removal from another entity. The involvement by the TWSP or the WS program in removing those swine under the proposed action would not be additive to the number of swine that could be removed by other entities in the absence of involvement by the TWSP or the WS program. The number of feral swine removed annually would likely be similar across the alternatives, since the removal of feral swine could occur even if the WS program was not directly involved with providing assistance under Alternative 1 and Alternative 2. Those activities proposed, including the proposed removal of feral swine by the TWSP under Alternative 3, would not be additive to the number of feral swine that could be removed by other entities under the other alternatives despite the lack of involvement by the WS program.

In addition, most non-lethal and lethal methods available for resolving damage or threats associated with feral swine would be available under any of the alternatives. Immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals would be the only methods that would have limited availability under all of the alternatives. Based on the evaluation in the EA, the availability of those methods under the proposed action alternative would not pose significant environmental risks when used by trained personnel and in accordance with their use guidelines.

Timmons et al. (2012) estimated the statewide feral swine population to range between 1.8 and 3.4 million feral swine, with a statewide average of 2.6 million feral swine. When responding to requests for assistance, the activities of the TWSP could result in the lethal removal of up to 45,000 feral swine in the State. The TWSP based the anticipated annual removal of feral swine on previous requests for assistance and the likelihood that the statewide population of feral swine will continue to increase in Texas. If the TWSP lethally removed 45,000 feral swine annually and the population remained at least stable in the State, the level of removal by the TWSP would represent 1.7% of a stable population estimated at 2.6 million. If the statewide feral swine population was 1.8 million and the TWSP removed 45,000 annually, the removal would represent 2.5% of the estimated statewide population if the population remained at least stable.

Based on the findings of the South Carolina Wild Hog Task Force (2012) and Timmons et al. (2012), the cumulative harvest of feral swine would likely not reach a magnitude that would cause a decline in the statewide feral swine population. Although the actual cumulative harvest of feral swine is unknown in the State, the combined harvest is not likely to reach a level where statewide population declines would occur based on the reproductive potential of swine. Activities conducted by the TWSP under the proposed action alternative would occur within the goals and strategies outlined for the statewide feral swine population by other agencies. Maintaining a local and/or statewide feral swine population at the lowest level possible, including extirpation, could be the goal of those agencies.

Any removal of feral swine by WS would also occur pursuant to Executive Order 13112, which requires federal agencies, to the extent practical and permitted by law, reduce invasion of exotic species and the associated damages. The National Invasive Species Council specifically lists feral swine as an invasive species pursuant to Executive Order 13112. In addition, Lowe et al. (2000) ranked feral swine as one of the 100 worst invasive species in the world.

Issue 2 - Effects on Non-target Wildlife Species Populations, Including T&E Species

Another issue often raised is the potential impacts to populations of wildlife from the unintentional removal of non-target animals during damage management activities. While the TWSP would make efforts to minimize the risks of lethally removing non-target animals, the potential does exist for the unintentional removal of non-targets during damage management activities.

Under the no involvement by WS alternative, the WS program would not provide assistance with any aspect of managing damage associated with feral swine; therefore, no direct impacts to non-targets would occur from WS. Under the technical assistance only alternative, the WS program could provide information on the proper use of methods and provide demonstration on the use of methods but the WS program would not provide direct operational assistance by using methods to alleviate feral swine damage or threats. However, the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Texas Wildlife Damage Management Association would continue to provide assistance under the TWSP despite no involvement by the WS program. Similar to the no involvement by the WS program alternative, under the technical assistance alternative, if other entities applied those methods as intended and with regard for non-target hazards, those methods would not result in the decline of non-target species' populations. If the WS program provided requesters with technical assistance but those entities did not implement any of the recommended actions and took no further action, the potential impacts to non-targets would be lower than proposed action. If those persons requesting assistance implemented recommended methods appropriately and as instructed or demonstrated, the potential impacts to non-targets would be similar to the proposed action. Methods or techniques used inappropriately would likely increase risks to non-targets. When employing direct operational assistance under the proposed action alternative, the TWSP could employ methods and use techniques that would avoid non-target removal as described in Chapter 3 of the EA under the standard operating procedures.

The TWSP reviewed those threatened and endangered species listed in the State during the development of the EA (see Appendix C in the EA). The TWSP has consulted and would continue to consult with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to evaluate activities to resolve feral swine damage to ensure the protection of threatened or endangered species and to comply with the Endangered Species Act.

Issue 3 - Effects of Damage Management Methods on Human Health and Safety

The threats to human safety from methods available would be similar across the alternatives since those methods would be available under all the alternatives. However, the expertise of the TWSP in using those methods available likely would reduce threats to human safety since employees of the TWSP would be trained and knowledgeable in the use of those methods. If methods incorrectly or without regard for human safety, risks to human safety would increase under any of the alternatives that people could employ those methods. The EA determined that the availability of immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals under the proposed action alternative would not increase risks to human safety from the use of those methods. Although risks do occur from the use of immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals, when the TWSP uses those methods in consideration of human safety, the use of those methods would not pose additional risks to human safety beyond those associated with the use of other methods. From FY 2011 through FY 2013, no adverse effects to human safety by the TWSP have occurred from the use of those methods available. The risks to human safety from the use of non-lethal and lethal methods, when used appropriately and by trained personnel, would be low.

Issue 4 - Humaneness and Animal Welfare Concerns of Methods

The EA also analyzed the issue of humaneness in relationship to methods available under each of the alternatives. Since many methods addressed in Appendix B of the EA would be available under all the alternatives, the issue of method humaneness would be similar for those methods across all the alternatives. As stated previously, immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals would have limited availability under the alternatives. Under the proposed action alternative, the TWSP, including the WS program, would consider method humaneness when conducting damage management activities and the TWSP would employ methods as humanely as possible. Under the technical assistance alternative, if those people receiving technical assistance from the WS program employ those methods recommended

inappropriately or without consideration of feral swine behavior, those persons could employ those methods inhumanely. A lack of understanding of the behavior of feral swine or improperly identifying the damage caused by feral swine along with inadequate knowledge and skill in using methodologies to resolve the damage or threat could lead to incidents with a greater probability of people perceiving those situations as inhumane under Alternative 1 and Alternative 2. Despite the lack of involvement by the WS program under Alternative 1 and WS' limited involvement under Alternative 2, those methods perceived as inhumane by certain individuals and groups would still be available to the public to use to resolve damage and threats caused by feral swine.

Issue 5 - Effectiveness of Feral Swine Damage Management Methods

The methods available to those people experiencing damage would be similar across the alternatives analyzed in detail. The only methods that would have limited availability to other entities under all the alternatives analyzed in detail would be the use of immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals. Since most methods available for resolving feral swine damage would be available to those people experiencing damage or threats under all the alternatives, the effectiveness of those methods when used as intended would be similar amongst the alternatives. A common issue raised is that the use of lethal methods would be ineffective because additional feral swine would likely return to the area, either after removal occurs or through an increase in reproduction, which gives the impression of creating a financial incentive to continue the use of only lethal methods. This assumes feral swine only return to an area where damage was occurring if an entity used lethal methods. However, the use of non-lethal methods is also often temporary, which could result in feral swine returning to an area where damage was occurring once those methods were no longer used or feral swine become habituated to those methods. The common factor when employing any method is that feral swine could return if suitable conditions continue to exist at the location where damage was occurring and feral swine densities were sufficient to occupy all available habitats.

Dispersing feral swine using non-lethal methods often requires repeated application to discourage them from an area, which increases costs, moves feral swine to other areas where they could cause damage, and would often be temporary if conditions attracting those feral swine to an area remain unchanged. Dispersing and the translocating of feral swine would move a problem from one area to another, which would require addressing damage caused by those swine at another location. The objective of the TWSP would be to respond to a request for assistance with the most effective methods and to provide for the long-term solution to the problem using WS' Decision Model to adapt methods in an integrated approach to managing feral swine damage that is agreed upon by the cooperator.

As part of an integrated approach to managing feral swine damage, the TWSP would have the ability to adapt methods to damage situations to effectively reduce or prevent damage from occurring. Under the proposed integrated approach, the TWSP could employ all methods, individually or in combination, as deemed appropriate through WS' Decision Model to address requests for assistance. The objective of the TWSP when receiving a request for assistance under the proposed action would be to reduce damage and threats to human health and safety or to prevent damage from occurring using an integrated approach to managing feral swine damage. Therefore, under the proposed action, the TWSP would employ methods adaptively to achieve that objective.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

No significant cumulative environmental impacts were identified from any of the three alternatives, including the proposed action. Minimal risks to public safety were identified when activities would be provided and expected by requesting individuals under Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 since only trained and experienced personnel of the TWSP would conduct and/or recommend damage management

activities. There would be a slight increased risk to public safety when persons who reject assistance and recommendations conduct their own activities under Alternative 2, and when no assistance was provided under Alternative 1. However, under all of the alternatives, those risks would not be to the point that the effects would be significant. The analysis in the EA indicates that an integrated approach to managing damage and threats caused by feral swine would not result in significant cumulative effects on the quality of the human environment.

DECISION AND RATIONALE

Based on the analyses of the alternatives that were developed to address those issues analyzed in detail within the EA, including individual and cumulative impacts of those alternatives, I, the decision-maker, have made the following decision.

Decision

I have carefully reviewed the EA prepared to meet the need for action. I find the proposed action alternative (Alternative 3) to be environmentally acceptable, addressing the issues and needs while balancing the environmental concerns of management agencies, landowners, advocacy groups, and the public. The analyses in the EA adequately addresses the identified issues, which reasonably confirm that no significant impact, individually or cumulatively, to wildlife populations or to the quality of the human environment are likely to occur from the proposed action, nor does the proposed action constitute a major federal action. Therefore, the analysis in the EA does not warrant the completion of an Environmental Impact Statement.

Based on the analyses in the EA, the issues identified are best addressed by selecting Alternative 3 (proposed action/no action) and applying the associated standard operating procedures discussed in Chapter 3 of the EA. Alternative 3 would successfully address feral swine damage management using a combination of the most effective methods and would not adversely affect the environment, property, human safety, and/or non-target species, including threatened or endangered species. Alternative 3 would offer the greatest chance of maximizing effectiveness and benefits to resource owners and managers while minimizing cumulative effects on the quality of the human environment that might result from the program's effect on target and non-target species' populations. In addition, Alternative 3 would present the greatest chance of maximizing net benefits while minimizing adverse effects to public health and safety. Alternative 3 would also offer a balanced approach to the issues of humaneness and aesthetics when all facets of those issues were considered. Further analysis would be triggered if changes occur that broaden the scope of damage management activities, that affect the natural or human environment, or from the issuance of new environmental regulations. Therefore, it is my decision to implement the proposed action/no action alternative (Alternative 3) as described in the EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

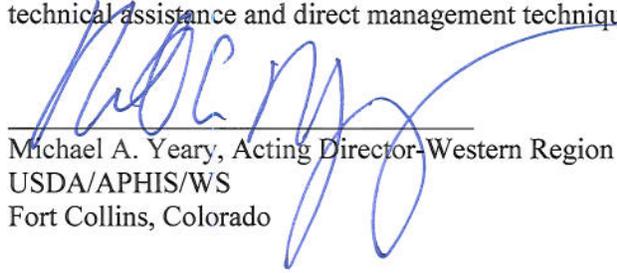
Based on the analyses provided in the EA, there are no indications that the proposed action (Alternative 3) would have a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment. I agree with this conclusion and therefore, find that an Environmental Impact Statement should not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Managing damage caused by feral swine, as conducted by the TWSP in Texas, would not be regional or national in scope.
2. Based on the analyses in the EA, the methods available would not adversely affect human safety based on their use patterns and standard operating procedures.

3. The proposed action/no action alternative would continue to have no significant effect on unique characteristics, such as parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic areas, or ecologically critical areas. Standard operating procedures and adherence to laws and regulations that govern impacts on elements of the human environment would assure that significant adverse impacts were avoided.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Although there may be opposition to killing feral swine, this action is not controversial in terms of size, nature, or effect. Based on consultations with the TPWD, the proposed action is not likely to cause a controversial disagreement among the appropriate resource professionals.
5. Based on the analysis in the EA and the accompanying administrative file, the effects of the proposed damage management program on the human environment would not be significant. The effects of the proposed activities are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The proposed action would not establish a precedent for any future action with significant effects. This action would not set a precedent for future actions that may be implemented or planned within the State.
7. No significant cumulative effects were identified through the assessment. The EA analyzed cumulative effects and concluded that such impacts were not significant for this or other anticipated actions to be implemented or planned within the State of Texas.
8. The proposed activities would not affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor would they likely cause any loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.
9. The TWSP has consulted and would continue to consult with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to evaluate activities to resolve feral swine damage to ensure the protection of threatened or endangered species and to comply with the Endangered Species Act.
10. The proposed action would comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws.

Rationale

The rationale for this decision is based on several considerations. This decision takes into account public comments, social/political and economic concerns, public health and safety, and the best available science. The foremost considerations are that: 1) the TWSP would only conduct damage management at the request of landowners/managers, 2) management actions would be consistent with applicable laws, regulations, policies and orders, and 3) no cumulative effects to the environment were identified in the analysis. As a part of this Decision, the TWSP would continue to provide effective and practical technical assistance and direct management techniques that reduce damage and threats of damage.



Michael A. Yeary, Acting Director-Western Region
USDA/APHIS/WS
Fort Collins, Colorado

5-14-2014

Date

APPENDIX A

RESPONSES TO COMMENTS ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: FERAL SWINE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT BY THE TEXAS WILDLIFE SERVICES PROGRAM

During the public involvement process for the EA, WS received one comment. In addition, the TWSP received one letter concurring with the need for action and the proposed action alternative. WS has reviewed the comment to identify additional issues, alternatives, and/or concerns that were not addressed in the EA. The comment received during the public involvement process is summarized below along with a response to the comment.

Comment 1 – Commenter wants the TWSP to consider re-introducing wolves in Texas to reduce the population of feral swine

Through an MOU, the TWSP consists of the WS program, the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, and the Texas Wildlife Damage Management Association. Section 1.5 of the EA provides a discussion of the authorities of the entities within the TWSP and other agencies. The TWSP does not have the authority to re-introduce wolves in Texas to reduce feral swine populations. Since the United States Fish and Wildlife Service has classified those wolves native to Texas as endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, the re-introduction of wolves would occur under their authority and direction of through cooperation with other state and federal agencies within the State.