

FERAL SWINE: Damages, Disease Threats, and Other Risks

What Are Feral Swine?

Feral swine (also called wild pigs, Eurasian boar, or feral hogs) are a harmful and destructive invasive species. They are not native to North America. Early explorers and settlers first brought feral swine into the United States in the 1500s as a source of food. The number of feral swine grew further after that; they were introduced repeatedly in different areas of the country and also started crossbreeding with escaped domestic pigs. Today, approximately 6 million feral swine can be found across more than 31 States.

Why Are They a Problem?

The damage feral swine cause is wide-ranging and far-reaching. With populations throughout the United States, this invasive animal—with few natural predators—negatively impacts everything from agriculture and the environment to human health and public safety. Feral swine can multiply faster than any other large mammal; females begin breeding at about 8 months and can produce 2 litters of 4–12 piglets every 12–15 months. The main reasons for their expanded range include accidental escapes or intentional releases from fenced facilities and people moving them illegally to new areas. Damages, costs, and risks from feral swine will only keep rising if their populations continue to expand.



Agriculture

Feral swine damage crops and destroy fields (reducing crop yield) with their feeding, rooting, trampling, and wallowing behaviors. They usually target sugar cane, corn, grain sorghum, wheat, oats, peanuts, and rice, among others. Vegetable and fruit crops, such as lettuce, spinach, melons, and pumpkins, are also attractive to them. Feral swine can also impact the regeneration of forests. By consuming seeds, nuts, and seedlings and damaging land, they keep new trees from growing and can stunt the growth of existing trees.



Feral swine can spread diseases to livestock. This causes economic losses such as decreased production, reduced feed efficiency (less food intake affects animal growth and overall health), lower reproductive success and increased mortality in the herd, and higher costs for veterinary care. Feral swine are omnivorous, meaning they eat just about anything. They can kill calves and lambs, and adult livestock are vulnerable to predation while giving birth.

In addition, feral swine degrade pasture grasses; eat, contaminate, and destroy livestock feed; and damage farm property, such as fences, water systems, irrigation ditches, troughs, and levees.

Health and Public Safety

Feral swine can carry at least 30 diseases and nearly 40 types of parasites that may affect people, pets, livestock, and wildlife. Some diseases, such as pseudorabies, are fatal to cats and dogs that may be exposed from direct contact with a feral swine carcass. Feral swine can also transmit foodborne illnesses, such as *E. coli*, toxoplasmosis, and trichinosis. In some areas, feral swine have been the cause of elevated waterborne bacteria levels in streams and irrigation canals, which is another risk for human health.

When in roadways or at airports, feral swine can collide with vehicles and aircraft, putting the safety of drivers, pilots, and passengers at risk. Other public safety risks arise when feral swine are in urban and suburban areas. As they become less afraid of people over time, they have shown aggression toward golfers, picnickers, and others. This behavior is more of a problem when they associate people with food because of handouts and improper waste disposal. In addition, feral swine may be aggressive to dogs and other pets.



FERAL SWINE: Damages, Disease Threats, and Other Risks

Natural Resources

Feral swine cause widespread damage to natural resources. They consume large amounts of vegetation; destroy plants with their rooting, soil compaction, and wallowing behaviors; and in some areas, may eat or uproot protected, sensitive, unique, or rare plants. Often, the damaged land then becomes vulnerable to erosion and non-native, invasive plants.

In addition, soil disturbance and vegetation loss from feral swine damage increases erosion and degrades water quality. Siltation (a form of water pollution) and contamination in streams and coastal areas with swine activity have contributed to declines in aquatic organisms, including freshwater mussels and insects.

Wildlife are impacted by feral swine, too. Since their diets overlap, feral swine and native wildlife end up competing for important and limited natural food sources, such as acorns and other forest tree nuts. Feral swine also reduce the amount of food available in general—they consume seeds, plants, and small animals (including insects, earthworms,

voles, shrews, turtles, amphibians, and ground-nesting birds). Feral swine will destroy nests and eat the eggs of alligators, other reptiles, and ground-nesting birds, such as quail, turkey, and shorebirds. And because feral swine prefer wet environments, they compete with native wildlife for scarce water resources during dry seasons. Feral swine can also have negative effects on threatened and endangered species and their habitats.

Lastly, feral swine can spread diseases to wildlife, some of which can be fatal. The damage they cause also tends to increase mosquito habitat; this, in turn, can increase the prevalence of avian malaria and avian pox, which threaten the health of native birds.



Property

If feral swine are in the area, they can quickly ruin homeowners' efforts to maintain and improve their properties. Destroyed vegetation and wallows reduce the aesthetic value of private properties, as well as public parks and recreational areas. Feral swine foraging, rooting, and wallowing also damages landscaping, golf courses, recreational fields, cemeteries, parks, lawns, and other natural areas.

In addition, adult feral swine weigh from 75 to 250 pounds on average, with some weighing considerably more. As a result, collisions with vehicles and aircraft can mean costly property damage.

Cultural and Historic Resources

Other resources affected by feral swine include national historic sites, tribal sacred sites and burial grounds, cemeteries, and archaeological sites and digs. Feral swine damage structures, destroy vegetation, and disturb soil and land. This can seriously degrade the significance and historic integrity of these sites. Foraging and habitat damage by feral swine can also negatively impact the distribution and abundance of plants and animals that may be used for traditional purposes (for example, sage for Native American ceremonies or herbal medicines).



Want To Learn More?

Call the USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services program in your State at **1-866-4-USDA-WS** or go to **www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife-damage/stopferalswine** to learn more about the problems caused by this invasive animal, as well as to seek advice and assistance in dealing with feral swine.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Program Aid No. 2195b
Revised May 2020

