

Wildlife Services

Protecting People
Protecting Agriculture
Protecting Wildlife

State Report

FY 2010

Texas



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Major Cooperators

- Texas Agrilife Extension, Texas A&M University System
- Texas Department of State Health Services
- Texas Wildlife Damage Management Association
- Sheppard, Laughlin and Randolph Air Force Bases
- Ft. Worth, Corpus Christi and Kingsville Naval Air Stations

USDA Resolves Wildlife Conflicts in Texas

Every day, residents, industries, organizations and agencies call on Texas Wildlife Services (WS) for help in protecting agriculture, human health and safety, natural resources and property from damage or threats posed by wildlife. WS' professional wildlife biologists respond with effective, selective and humane strategies to resolve wildlife conflicts. Texas is a diverse mix of urban and suburban areas, agricultural lands, forest and desert environments, and is home to over 22 million people. Texas has more farms (157,000) and farm acreage than any other state. At the same time, Texas has 24 cities with populations of 100,000 or more. The state also has a remarkably diverse range of wildlife species. This combination of wildlife, humans and their associated conflicts makes the Texas WS program the largest wildlife damage management program in the United States. Each year the agency provides service on more than 5,500 properties covering more than 20 million acres. WS serves rural and urban areas with technical assistance, education and direct assistance in wildlife damage management.

Applying Science & Expertise to Wildlife Challenges

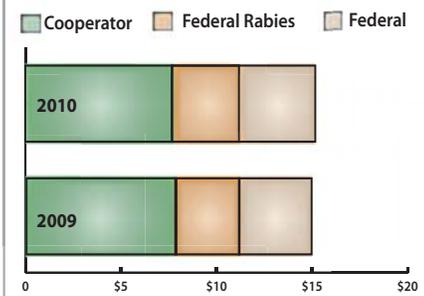
WS offers information, advice, equipment and materials that enable many people to resolve wildlife conflicts on their own. Often, this technical assistance can be provided over the phone. WS also provides on-site expertise, or direct assistance, to manage complex wildlife problems that cannot be safely or effectively resolved by others. To support this effort, WS conducts scientific research across the nation to develop answers to new problems posed by wildlife and to ensure the program benefits from the latest science and technology.

Protecting the environment from invasive species—Invasive wildlife causes millions of dollars in damage to agriculture and the environment. Feral swine impact native wildlife and rangeland, add bacterial pollutants to watersheds, destroy crops, and serve as reservoirs for wildlife and livestock diseases. European starlings compete with native birds for nesting cavities and for insects, spread diseases to livestock and congregate in urban settings so as to constitute a human health hazard. Texas WS provides on-site management of the conflicts caused by these and other invasive species as part of an effort to restore healthy ecosystems and protect public health.

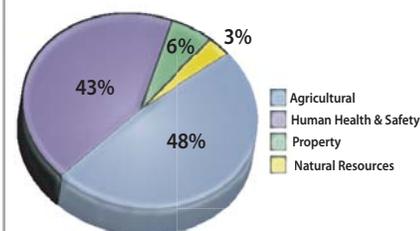
Protecting Livestock—Historically, the Texas livestock industry has suffered losses to predators such as coyotes, bobcats, feral swine and eagles. Livestock protection is a major element of the Texas WS program. In 2009, the National Agricultural Statistical Service (NASS) reported 197,000 sheep and goats, valued at \$18.5 million, were lost in Texas to predation. In 2009, NASS reported a loss of 46,000 cattle and calves valued at \$19.5 million. Estimates for sheep and goats can be considered conservative, reflecting only losses reported after an initial count of lambs and kids. Research suggests losses could be two to three times higher if no control programs were in place. Predator-related losses represent direct costs to the producer (i.e., value of the lost animal or lost wool, etc.), but also such losses as the future value of associated animal products. The local economy also feels this indirectly through the reduced buying power of ranchers and farmers. Texas WS saved livestock valued at over \$38 million in FY 2009 through predation management.

Oral Rabies Vaccination Program—Two canine rabies epidemics emerged in Texas in 1988, one in coyotes and dogs in southern Texas and the other in gray fox in central and western Texas. In 1994, the public health threat of these expanding epizootics prompted the Governor to declare rabies a public health emergency. In February 1995, the Texas Department of State Health Services (TDSHS) initiated a cooperative program, the oral rabies vaccination (ORV) program. Texas WS is a major contributor, helping to fund and distribute millions of oral baits by plane and helicopter every year.

Total Funding (Millions)



Resources Protected % of Total Funds



United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

With a goal of creating zones of vaccinated coyotes and gray foxes, the project is proving highly successful. Canine rabies cases in southern Texas have declined from the highs of 122 in 1994 and 142 in 1995. The only reported cases since January 2000, were one case each year in 2001 and 2004, each of those within one mile of the Rio Grande along the U.S. and Mexico border. No cases have been documented since 2004 and the current program maintains a border zone to prevent the re-invasion of the disease from Mexico. Surveillance conducted after the 2005 bait drop showed 80 percent of the coyotes tested positive for the biomarker that indicates bait acceptance and 29 percent developed an immune response to the vaccine.

The gray fox program has shown success from the highs of 244 reported cases in 1995 and 101 in 1996. Reports then fell below 70 per year to only three cases in 2005. However, in 2007 the gray fox strain of the virus was identified in coyotes in sufficient quantities to prove it was also being maintained in the coyote population. Extraordinary efforts by WS and TDSHS in 2007 and 2008 resulted in the outbreak once again being contained within an ORV barrier. Only two cases were identified in FY 2009 and no cases were identified in Texas in 2010 and the current bait strategy is to prevent the disease from reoccurring in West Texas.

Protecting Human Health and Safety at Commercial and Military Airports—WS offers consultation and management assistance to commercial and military airports to assess wildlife conflicts and improve safety by reducing hazards associated with wildlife. Biologists are trained and certified in the development of wildlife hazard assessments and management plans.

Six military bases have entered into agreements with WS to fund an airfield operations biologist at each facility. Wildlife/aircraft collisions disrupt the military mission and compromise air safety, risking lives in the air and on the ground.

Wildlife management and habitat modification at airports can help eliminate or reduce collisions between aircraft and birds or other wildlife. WS biologist identified that insect-eating birds were responsible for a large percentage of the strikes at one of the Air Force training bases and these strikes were highest during the peak of migration. By working with the military, an insecticide was applied to the open grasslands surrounding the aircraft movement areas eliminating the food source for the birds. As a result, strikes by insect-eating birds declined 90 percent during the fall migration period and the need for lethal control has been nearly eliminated.

Protecting Multiple Resources from Beaver Damage—Texas WS continues to implement extensive measures to control damage to crops, timber, rangeland, other property and natural resources caused by beaver activities. The beavers' burrowing weakens earthen dams, highway foundations, dikes and railroad track beds. Dam building floods roadways, pastures, crops and timber lands by blocking water systems and plugging culverts. Feeding activities result in the loss of trees and shrubs in urban to rural situations and cause destruction of water structures such as docks, piers and house boats.

Protecting Pets and Other Companion Animals from Predation—Coyote predation on pets in urban and suburban areas is increasing. Associated with that threat, people fear that small children may be attacked by coyotes. Because coyotes are rarely confronted by humans in urban and suburban areas, they lose their perception of a threat, becoming bolder and more aggressive toward humans and pets. In response, city and county officials in Austin entered into an agreement with WS to provide an enhanced coyote control program in that area.

Looking to the Future

Requests for feral swine damage management continue to increase each year as a result of the viability and range expansion of feral swine and their adverse impacts on multiple resources. Additional funding will be required if WS' operational and research efforts can begin to get a handle on this expanding resource problem.

The need for wildlife damage management continues to grow in urban and suburban areas, where property damage and significant risks to human health and safety are elevated. Texas has several metropolitan areas with a need for such management, yet traditional funding sources usually leave these areas under-served. Texas WS will look for innovative ways to provide technical assistance and direct services to metropolitan and suburban residents experiencing wildlife damage.

Funding

In addition to receiving federally allocated funds, Texas WS also receives money from producers, private individuals, businesses, and other Federal, State and local government agencies. In most cases, these cooperators need help to resolve wildlife damage problems.

Top 5 Major Assistance Activities in 2010:

- Protecting livestock, wildlife and exotics from predators
- Protecting public health from rabies and other zoonotic diseases
- Protecting civil and military aviation from wildlife strikes
- Protecting crops, timber, dikes, impoundments and property from beaver damage
- Protecting urban and rural homes and property from damage by wildlife

Top 5 WS Research Projects of Interest to Texas in 2010:

- Improving feral swine damage management methods and disease surveillance
- Starling control and the role of birds in spreading diseases at feedlots
- Gray fox, bobcat and coyote ecology in West Texas
- Uptake of oral rabies baits and various biomarkers in gray fox and coyotes
- Coyote ecological studies