**Excerpts from**

# THE FERAL HOG IN MISSISSIPPI

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Feral hogs are a very prolific large wild mammal. A feral hog population can double in a 4 month period due to the fact that hogs breed throughout the year and can have up to 13 young per litter. Feral hog litters average 4-8 throughout much of their range; however, litter sizes vary due to genetic makeup of the animals (more Russian or European bore influenced animals have smaller litter sizes) the quality of the habitat, and drought conditions. Female feral hogs reach sexual maturity at around 6 months of age; whereas, males tend to become reproductively active at around 18 months of age.

Feral hogs use a wide range of habitats. They prefer moist dense bottomland conditions, but will thrive in nearly every habitat that will provide cover and protection of the extreme heat. In Mississippi, they have even been found thriving in pine forests, recent regenerations, and old fields. During conditions of hot weather, animals can be found in wallows or muddy depressions that help keep the animal cool.

Feral hogs tend to be most active during cooler periods. During hotter weather, they will tend to rest during the day and become active at night. Under cooler conditions, however, they can be active throughout the day. In habitats with high food availability, hogs will tend to have limited home ranges. If food becomes scarce, they will move several miles in a night to find another food source. The annual home range of feral hogs often depends on the food quality and abundance and disturbance from humans. Feral hogs are opportunistic omnivorous feeders, eating almost any high protein item they encounter. They

feed much of the year on succulent green vegetation. They will consume many fruits, grains, and animal matter. In the spring, they forage mostly on grasses, roots, tubers, and forbs. In the fall, they prefer acorns, but will also consume grains such as corn, wheat, and sorghum. They readily consume carrion or dead meat items and will catch and kill many animals. They have been documented to kill and eat insects, reptiles (including snakes), amphibians, birds, bird eggs, small mammals, and young and sick large mammals, such as deer and goats. Feral hogs are also known to cannibalize young hogs.

Feral hogs pose a number of biological, social, institutional, and economic problems for landowners, producers, and hunters. Effects on wildlife include direct effects through predation and indirect effects through competition for food and habitat damage. There is evidence that hogs may depredate wildlife including deer and perhaps young fawns and destroy nests of wild turkey, quail, and other ground nesting birds. Wild hogs in coastal areas which serve as important nesting areas for marine turtles, especially the loggerhead, pose a serious threat to successful nesting of turtles which return to a traditional beach to nest.

The presence of feral hogs is often noted not by visual sighting, but through their less than subtle signs of activity. Rooting or digging is the sign most often noticed and associated with feral hogs. Hogs root or dig in the ground to find food. If a food source, such as fresh shoots, young roots, or grubs is present, hogs will methodically root the area until the food is depleted. This can result in rootings of several acres in size. If the ground is soft, this rooting or diggings activity can be up to 3 feet deep. Feral hogs can also leave signs from their wallows, rubs on trees, tracks and scat.

Rooting and wallowing can cause severe damage to habitat and farm. Habitat damage can have negative effects on desirable fauna, can positively influence undesirable species and change the epidemiology of diseases in the process.

In a recent study at MSU, nearly 41% of feral hogs sampled around the state of Mississippi were infected with Toxoplasma. Hunters should be advised to cook all feral hog meat to an internal temperature of 170o or freeze for at least a period of 20 days. Both of these processes will kill the organism.

Trapping is probably the most effective method of controlling feral hog populations in Mississippi. The dense nature of feral hog habitat lends itself better to trapping than hunting. Usually, box or corral traps that catch multiple hogs are most effective and popular.

Check with the USDA Wildlife Services or Veterinary Services for details on proper fencing techniques for feral hogs. To be hog proof, fences should be of a small mesh, at least 36 inches in height, and with some fencing buried under ground.

With the issues surrounding feral hogs, it is easy to understand how most wildlife biologist around the United States would have a very negative opinion of feral hogs. While hunters enjoy the presence of a second large mammal to pursue, they often find the feral hog population can quickly reach a level they cannot control. Research from Florida indicates that at least 50% of feral hog populations need to be harvested to maintain the population at a steady state. To reduce the population, 75-80% of the population needs to be taken annually. This requires a lot of work year round to keep feral hog populations in check.

Feral hogs are well established and are not likely to be eradicated due to their highly adaptable nature and reproductive capability. Individual opinions of feral hogs vary greatly. Many individuals have never seen feral hogs, because of their usually nocturnal nature. But, while hunters enjoy having additional quarry to pursue, farmers can often suffer great economic losses due to the presence of feral hogs through direct field and fence damage and transmission of disease to livestock. Biologists are concerned about the impacts of feral hogs on local wildlife and plant communities, and human health professionals of the transmission of zoonotic pathogens. What ever your opinion, the feral hog is

probably here to stay.  Not addressing the issue of managing this species on your land could be a costly mistake.

Precautions needed when working with feral hogs

1. Always were disposable plastic or rubber gloves when dressing and cleaning feral hogs.  Avoid direct skin contact with blood and reproductive organs.

2. As soon as possible, wash hands with soap and hot water after dressing feral hogs.

3. Properly dispose of the remaining carcass, do not feed uncooked feral hog meat to dogs, cats or other animals.

4. Cook meat from feral hogs to an internal temperature of 170o F or freeze for 20 or more days.