



Land Managers' Feral Hog Management Practices Inventory in Florida

KENNETH T. GIOELI* AND JOANNA HUFFMAN

University of Florida, IFAS, St. Lucie County Cooperative Extension, 8400 Picos Road, Suite 101, Fort Pierce, FL 34945

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Early explorers and settlers brought hogs with them to Florida. Many of these animals escaped from captivity and established feral populations. Current estimates indicate that the population of feral hogs may exceed 500,000 in Florida. Unfortunately, feral hogs have proven to be difficult to manage. The UF/IFAS St. Lucie County Cooperative Extension conducted a feral hog management practices survey to determine what practices are being undertaken by public and private natural areas managers. Results showed that land managers struggle with feral hog damage they deem to be moderate to severe. Hunting and trapping strategies have been used. Current control strategies have resulted in marginal success. One-fourth of the land managers surveyed indicated total failure to manage feral hogs.

Feral hogs, also called wild hogs, wild boar, feral swine, and wild pigs, are common in Florida (Fig. 1). It is believed that hogs were first brought to Florida in 1539 by Hernando de Soto to provision a settlement established at Charlotte Harbor in Lee County (Giuliano, 2010). However, there are some who speculate that hogs had been brought previously to the same site in 1521 by Ponce de Leon during a brief visit. During the next four centuries, explorers and settlers transported or herded domestic hogs with them as they traveled throughout Florida. Many of these animals escaped from captivity and established feral populations. The population of feral hogs is believed to exceed 500,000 in Florida.

So what can be done about this feral hog problem? Adaptive management is the key because no one method of feral hog management is 100% effective (Hamrick et al., 2011). Site managers

will have to devise a site-specific plan for managing feral hogs. Mississippi State University produced an Extension publication in 2011 indicating that hunting (including hunting with dogs) as the sole management technique is rarely effective for significant reduction of large populations of feral hogs (Hamrick et al., 2011). Instead, they recommend that rigorous trapping using corral traps capable of capturing entire sounders at one time is the most effective method for large-scale removal of feral hogs. A regiment of pre-baiting the corral trap during a period of several days will help lure hogs into the trap. During pre-baiting, monitoring the trap using a remote sensing camera is useful to determine the number of feral hogs in the sounder and when the hogs are comfortable entering and leaving the trap. Once the entire sounder is on the bait, the trap door can be set to spring.

If corral trapping is not feasible, adaptive management can be an alternative. Basically, adaptive management is doing whatever it takes to get the job done while complying with the law and with local site restrictions. For example, leg snares and other strategies may be illegal without special permits. Also, the use of firearms and dogs may be prohibited on the property being managed. In some cases, a hunting license may be required if firearms or archery are to be used (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2011). However, feral hogs are usually treated as a nuisance species. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is the state agency responsible for regulating hunting and trapping of nuisance wildlife species.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has additional requirements. Feral hog trappers are required to have a Feral Swine Dealer's Identification Card when 1) moving hogs to slaughter; 2) moving hogs to a game reserve; and 3) moving hogs to an approved feral swine holding facility. The identification card is not required if the feral hog is dispatched on site (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2007).



Fig. 1. Feral hog photo provided by UF/IFAS Information and Communication Services.

Materials and Methods

The UF/IFAS St. Lucie County Cooperative Extension office conducted a feral hog management practices survey to 1) determine what control practices are being employed by managers of

*Corresponding author; phone: (772) 462-1660; email: ktgioeli@ufl.edu

both public and private natural areas, and 2) to determine if these practices are effective in controlling feral hogs. SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) was the survey instrument utilized. The survey was distributed via email through networks such as the Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area, Florida Invasive Species Partnership, and feral hog trappers.

Results and Discussion

Of the 87 land managers that responded to the survey, 70% (60/87) responded that they were managing public lands while 30% (26/87) were managing private lands. Eighty-two percent (71/87) of the respondents were managing properties larger than 200 acres, while 2.3% (2/87) managed 151 to 200 acres, 1.1% (1/87) managed 101 to 150 acres, 4.6% (4/87) managed 51 to 100 acres, and 10.3% (9/87) managed 50 acres or less (Fig. 2).

All respondents indicated that rooting was the most frequent hog damage they experienced, followed by wallowing activity at 70% (61/87) (Fig. 3). Other problems reported by land managers included tussing of woody trees and shrubs at 26% (23/87) and aggression toward humans and domestic animals at 7% (6/87). Three additional reports indicated that hogs had destroyed sea turtle nests and had destroyed crops. In addition, survey respondents were asked how they would rate the level of damage caused by these feral hogs. Eighty-five people responded to this question. About six of 10 (50/85) respondents indicated that they had experienced moderate damage while one of five (17/85) indicated severe damage.

Land managers were asked about the strategies they utilized to manage and/or eradicate feral hogs on their properties. Seventy-eight people responded. Sixty percent (47/78) of the respondents indicated that hunting was used, followed by trapping at 51% (40/78). When surveyed about types of traps (Fig. 4), 58 people responded. Seventy-eight percent (45/58) of the respondents stated that they used smaller portable single-hog traps while 45% (26/58) utilized corral traps. A small number of respondents 7% (4/58) indicated that they utilized leg snares. When asked how effective their feral hog control strategies have been, 68 people responded to the question. Forty-seven percent (32/68) of these respondents indicated the practices they currently used were only marginally effective while 25% (17/68) indicated total failure.

Finally, survey respondents were asked what was done with the meat following a successful hunting or trapping program (Fig. 5). Forty-three respondents answered this question. Seventy-seven percent (33/43) of the respondents indicated that the carcasses were disposed of and the meat was not used. Thirty percent (30/43) indicated that the meat was used by self and family. Nineteen percent (8/43) indicated that the meat was donated to a food bank or needy family. Thirty-two respondents added additional comments, most of which indicated that they let the trappers and hunters dispose of the carcass as they saw fit. This result indicates that several respondents did not know the ultimate end uses of the hog carcasses.

Overall, land managers continue to struggle with feral hog damage they deem to be moderate to severe in scope. Hunting and trapping strategies have been employed by these land managers,

Acres Under Management

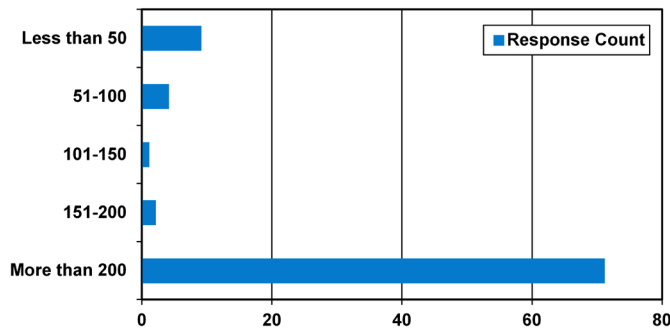


Fig. 2. Acres under feral hog management as reported by a survey of Florida land managers.

Traps Used

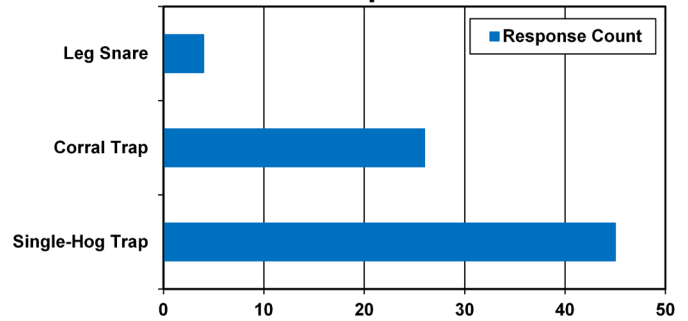


Fig. 4. Traps used on feral hogs as reported by a survey of Florida land managers.

Damage

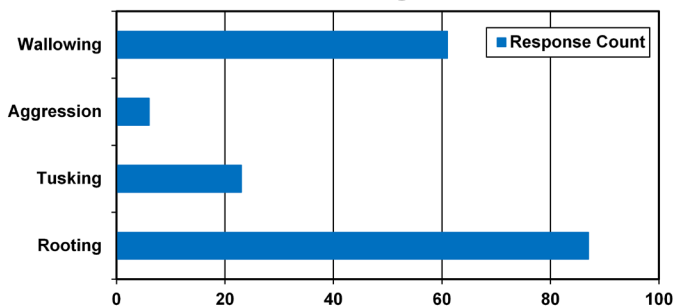


Fig. 3. Problems caused by feral hogs as reported by a survey of Florida land managers.

Uses of Meat

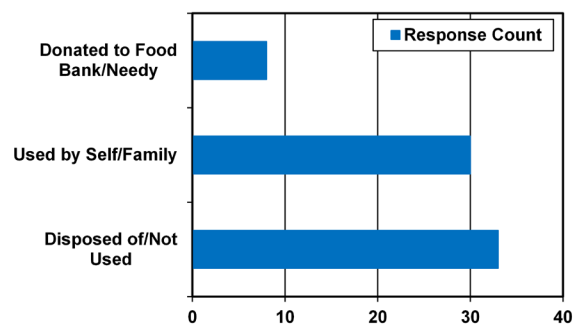


Fig. 5. Uses of feral hog meat following hunting and trapping as reported by a survey of Florida land managers.

and the majority of them use smaller portable single-hog traps when trapping. Current control strategies being employed have resulted in marginal success while one-fourth of the land managers indicated total failure to manage feral hogs. There is need for a follow-up survey to determine if there are policy or regulatory roadblocks inhibiting the effectiveness of feral hog management on private and public lands in Florida. In addition, it would be worthwhile to examine any logistical difficulties with corral traps and other hunting and trapping methodologies. Finally, there is an obvious need for increased education to help teach land managers how to adopt an adaptive management strategy to improve feral hog management practices.

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