



THE TRUE STORY OF THE TEXAS PIGS



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Approximately 20 percent of Texas' feral swine population is infected with Pseudorabies (PRV), and at least 10 percent is infected with swine brucellosis. The USDA considers Texas swine to be "free" of both diseases. Seems contradictory, doesn't it? Here's the rest of the story.

This scenario is part of a larger situation that also applies to bovine tuberculosis (TB) and brucellosis, in which the wild-life-domestic animal interface continues to re-infect domestic livestock in certain parts of the country. For TB, it occurs in Michigan; for brucellosis, it is the Greater Yellowstone Area; and for PRV/swine brucellosis, it is Texas, and probably other states that don't know it.

USDA is trapped in decades-old eradication programs for the diseases mentioned above with no exit strategy. When these programs were begun, deer were not a problem in Michigan, feral swine weren't a factor in Texas, and no one was worrying about Yellowstone elk or bison spreading brucellosis. Texas routinely has swine brucellosis diagnosed in cattle, and *B. suis* was cultured from a horse with fistulous withers just a few years ago.

So where does that leave us now with the continuing threat of introduction of these diseases from feral swine? There are four major types of swine populations. The true commercial operations are located in the panhandle. These are the hogs the USDA refers to as "free" for PRV/brucellosis, and they truly are. The 750,000 or so Texas commercial breeding sows are housed in biosecure settings with good disease management programs, strong veterinary involvement and effective surveillance systems. Most of the feeder/grower pigs from those Texas farrowing operations are finished in other states, such as Iowa and Oklahoma, and we maintain commuter herd agreements with those states to allow ease of movement.

The next subset of Texas swine are the show hog raisers. Texas has a great

reputation for raising high-quality show hogs. These animals are also raised with good biosecurity practices, but because of their often-rural locations, smaller-size operations are not always in biosecure "closed" houses, leaving them more vulnerable to interaction with feral swine.

The third subset is the class of hogs that includes hobby farmers and a specific class termed as food-waste feeders. The politically incorrect term for food-waste feeders is garbage feeders. In general, these folks utilize the weakest biosecurity practices, and their hogs are at the highest risk for interfacing with wild hogs. TAHC requires a permit to feed food waste to hogs and a test of all breeding animals in such a permitted facility every two years. We make monthly inspections to ensure the food waste has no meat in it. That policy is to protect against the accidental introduction of Foot and Mouth Disease through contaminated meat, as happened to the UK in 2001. Legal food waste fed to swine can only consist of dairy, produce or bakery products.

The fourth population consists of feral swine, with a population of about three million head currently. The definition of feral swine is "swine that have lived all or any part of their life as free-roaming." Many folks believe feral hogs are the offspring of Russian boars, but we know in Texas that they are usually just normal domestic hogs gone wild and their subsequent generations of offspring.

TAHC oversees the operation of approximately 125 feral swine holding facilities, which allow folks to catch wild hogs (weighing more than 60 pounds) and bring them alive to these facilities for purchase by those who then take them on to a slaughter plant when they get a "load." TAHC also allows the transport of wild boars to game preserves for hunting purposes under certain situations. Otherwise, the only legal way to move a feral hog in Texas is straight to slaughter. We encourage legal capture, transport and/or hunting

to help control population growth.

Because we know feral swine (especially boars) routinely come into contact with domestic swine housed outdoors, Texas requires all adult breeding swine to be tested for PRV and brucellosis at change of ownership. There are 14 markets in Texas that sell hogs every week, and TAHC inspectors bleed about 4,000 adult hogs each year at markets. The largest hog markets in Texas are at Brenham, Seguin and Muleshoe. Texas slaughter plants also collect blood on adult swine that are processed, which is then submitted to the TAHC lab in Austin for testing.

TAHC has mitigation measures in place to protect both animal and public health through market tests of hogs, slaughter tests, routine testing of food-waste feeders and the creation of feral swine holding facilities. To the best of my knowledge, we are currently the only state to do any of these things. If you add in our strategic partnerships with the Texas Department of Agriculture, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, USDA Veterinary Services, USDA Wildlife Services and Texas veterinary practitioners, it truly does take a village to protect us all from feral swine disease issues. I am proud to say Texas has the most comprehensive and effective disease prevention programs of any state to protect domestic swine, livestock and the public from feral swine diseases.

Lastly, for the small animal practitioners out there, don't forget that pet pot-belly pigs must also meet state swine entry requirements if moved across state lines. For your client's sake, please remind them to wear gloves when processing any feral swine they shoot, as swine can remain bacteremic if infected with brucella for a long time. If you have any questions about Texas swine health activities, please don't hesitate to call or access our website. Thanks for all you do as our partners in this regard! [TV](#)