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84TH TEXAS LEGISLATURE REGULAR SESSION

ARE YOU IN OR OUT?



THE POWER IS IN YOUR VOICE



NILGAI IN TEXAS



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Nilgai here, nilgai there, nilgai everywhere! Up to 30 per square mile in some parts of South Texas. You may be wondering why the state veterinarian is talking about nilgai. Here are the reasons why.

Nilgai are large Indian Antelope, first introduced into South Texas for recreational hunting purposes almost 100 years ago. Like most other exotic critters brought in from far away locations, they have done quite well since their ancestors were given a one-way ticket to Texas.

They have been seen routinely from Laredo to near Corpus Christi and down into the Rio Grande Valley recently. Like most introduced exotic animal species though, they created their own set of unique problems upon release. Coming from India, they are the natural host of the cattle fever tick. With a travel range of almost 25 miles for the males during breeding season, they obviously tend to

get around.

Unfortunately, part of their “getting around” includes visits to northern Mexico. The problem down there in Mexico is that the cattle fever tick is found everywhere, and those ticks like to feed on nilgai as much as a cattle.

The U.S. and Texas have a permanent fever quarantine zone that has proven quite effective for keeping stray or smuggled Mexican cattle and horses out of Texas but not so much for nilgai. The recent effect of that fact is that fever tick-infested nilgai have recently been detected in both Cameron (Brownsville) and Willacy counties. Nilgai bringing ticks in from Mexico started the infestations, but now they seem to be established in some South Texas pastures many miles from the Mexican border and have ultimately infested cattle, horses and white tail deer living in the same locations.

Cameron County also has thousands of acres of wildlife refuge country where there are no barriers to wildlife movements. That fact has compounded the problem.

Once nilgai infested the local cattle pastures, the secondary effect was that cattle movements and white tail deer movements have since spread the ticks even farther. At press time, we have infested pastures outside the normal quarantine areas in Jim Wells, Kleberg and Hidalgo counties as well the previously mentioned Cameron and Willacy.

The marketability and well-being of the Texas cattle industry is linked directly to our ability to assure trade partners that our cattle are “fever tick-free.” With a million Mexican origin feeder cattle in the state at any time, almost all of which have the babesia organism in their blood from being infected as calves in Mexico, we are only one step away from active “Texas Fever”

disease being a reality again if the tick is able to re-establish itself here.

The wildcard in all of this is the value of nilgai hunting to land owners, the enjoyment it brings to hunters and the fact that they are really tasty. Those facts became evident at a recent meeting of large South Texas ranches when one ranch owner stated publicly that his operation makes more money off nilgai hunting than cattle ranching. There lies the problem.

This situation is bigger than animal agriculture, and once again, conflicting interests between wildlife and agriculture have created a very difficult problem to solve. I don’t have the answers. All I know is that this is not going away anytime soon, and it will take us all to help manage it. Cattle owners, hunters, wildlife enthusiasts and veterinarians obviously all have a stake here.

I simply ask you all to be cognizant of the importance of a strong surveillance system to quickly identify fever ticks if they are found outside the quarantine zone. If you don’t have some of the free tick identification mailer kits in your clinic, please contact your local Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) office to have some delivered. If you or your client picks a tick and you send it in a pre-labeled tick vial to our Austin lab, we will identify the tick for you at no charge.

More importantly, I ask that you become knowledgeable of the subject so you can help provide good education and advice to your clients who own livestock or simply like to hunt. It is not anyone’s intention to remove nilgai completely from Texas, but we will need to control them near the Mexican border. We can also raise our awareness of the issues so that ranching and hunting operations are more profitable, cattle can remain healthy and the public won’t have to endure the hassles of the temporary county quarantines that currently exist north of Brownsville. [TV](#)



A hunter-killed nilgai being inspected for cattle fever ticks in South Texas