

Texas may let hunters shoot pigs from choppers

02/20/2009

By PAUL J. WEBER / Associated Press

Millions of wild pigs weighing up to 300 pounds have been tearing up crops, trampling fences and eating just about anything in their path in Texas. But now they had better watch their hairy backs.

A state lawmaker is proposing to allow ordinary Texans with rifles and shotguns to shoot the voracious, tusked animals from helicopters.

For years, ranchers in the Lone Star State have hired professional hunters in choppers to thin the hogs' fast-multiplying ranks. Now state Rep. Sid Miller of the Fort Worth area wants to bring more firepower to the task by issuing permits to sportsmen.

"I've had numerous calls and complaints that someone needs to do something," Miller said. "We're losing ground on this problem."

His bill has not yet been assigned to a committee, and its chances of becoming law are uncertain. But if approved, the program could be the first of its kind in the nation. Some other states, like Gov. Sarah Palin's Alaska, allow aerial shooting, but only to control predators such as wolves.

Some Texans worry about collateral damage.

"If they're going to open up to where you can do this and anybody who's got a helicopter can go off to an old boy's place and hunt, that's going to be bad," said Jay Smith, owner of Smith Helicopters in Cotulla. Some people "may get confused and shoot the rancher's dog or a calf."

Miller gave assurances the hunting would be closely regulated, though details on such things as how many hunters would be allowed to take part, and how many hogs they would be permitted to kill, have yet to be worked out.

"You're not going to have some bubba up there going, 'Pass me a beer and ammo' and hunting some hogs," the legislator said. "We certainly want to do it right."

Many hunters and landowners will probably leave the carcasses in the field, just as they do now. Wild hogs that are gunned down cannot be sold for meat under U.S. agriculture regulations. (Moreover, wild boar is said by some to be tough and gamey.)

An estimated 2 million wild hogs are causing \$52 million a year in crop damage in Texas, according to agricultural experts. Pigs that they are, they eat just about anything, including the carcasses of their own brethren. They trample crops, dig up plants with their snouts and steal animal feed. Entire peanut farms have been stripped.

And the pasture-wrecking porkers are causing trouble well beyond farms. Authorities in Texas are reporting an increase in collisions between hogs and

cars, while golf courses and suburbs are increasingly finding turf uprooted by hogs.

The animals are descended from hogs introduced into Texas by Spanish explorers more than 300 years ago. But their numbers began booming in the 1980s.

The big ones have no natural predators. Not even a coyote will tangle with a pig bigger than 20 pounds.

During a recent pass in his helicopter over Mertzon in West Texas, Kyle Lange, a professional hunter who is paid to pick off wild hogs from the air in what some are calling a "pork chopper," offered a glimpse of the magnitude of the problem.

As his helicopter flew over, several packs of hogs that had been rooting around in the brush or napping in the sun suddenly scattered in all directions, with piglets scampering to keep close to their mothers, the little hairs on their backs blown back by the breeze from the chopper.

"You can kill 300 in a day from up here in the Panhandle and you've just slowed them down is all," Lange said over the whump-whump of his two-seat chopper.

Wildlife experts have tried less brutal methods to control their numbers. But the hogs are smart and have learned to avoid traps, and a birth control pill for female hogs is still in development. Many experts agree aerial hunting works.

Nearly 1,100 permits to kill hogs from the air were issued in Texas last year, up from 201 in 2000. Under Miller's bill, weekend hunters would be able to get permits too, though they would also have to pay landowners for the right to hunt on their property.

Heath Lusty
Jack County Extension Agent
Agriculture & Natural Resources
940-567-2132 office
817-584-6628 cell