

Are Feral Hogs A Threat to Water Quality?

Editor's Note: Farmers, ranchers and outdoorsmen know firsthand the damage done by the feral hog population. Across the United States, the feral hog - regardless of arguments over the actual source of these porcine pillagers - have caused plenty of damage to crops, farmland and untold damage to wild areas. Today, however, a report from Louisiana State University says they may actually be damaging water quality.

The proliferation of feral hogs in Louisiana has been well documented as have many of the negative impacts on wildlife.

But a research project by the LSU Agricultural Center's School of Renewable Natural Resources in conjunction with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries shows that feral hogs, recorded in all 64 parishes, are having a similarly detrimental effect on water quality on some water bodies in central Louisiana between Alexandria and Natchitoches.

The research, conducted from June 18-Sept. 1 in 2015, revealed that pathogens were extensive in sampled water bodies on private lands adjacent to Kisatchie National Forest and were regularly associated with feral hogs. The water at all 40 sites in the study contained one or more pathogens that were potentially unsafe for human or wildlife contact.

Of particular concern, of the 40 sites sampled, DNA

fingerprinting positively matched 22 sites with high levels of E. coli in the water with fecal samples obtained from feral hogs both within and outside the areas sampled.

Additionally, salmonella was found at 38 of 40 sites. Both pathogens are considered harmful to both humans and wildlife. Associations were also noted between feral hog presence, heterotrophic bacteria counts (a measure of overall bacteria amount in the water) and microbes that could cause leptospirosis, yersinosis and Klebsiella pneumonia.

For wildlife, the diseases could have devastating effects. Leptospira spp. can cause kidney damage and loss of renal function in squirrels, raccoons and white-tailed deer. Leptospira has caused abortions in white-tailed deer and many other mammals.

Salmonella spp. can infect wild turkeys and other wild birds resulting in liver damage, severe diarrhea and death. Klebsiella spp. can cause sinusitis and pneumonia in wild birds and turkeys. Yersinia spp. can cause gastroenteritis in white-tailed deer and raccoons, and severe overwinter mortality has been observed in wild migratory birds.

Water quality in this region has suffered greatly on both privately and publicly owned land as the feral hog population has continued to expand, according to the report. Feral



Hog Heaven?! These mama and baby feral hogs are enjoying the welcome moisture on a ranch just southeast of Robert Lee near the Colorado River. Hogs have become quite an issue in Coke County in recent years. The hogs in the photo on the opposite page were also photographed on a local ranch. Photos courtesy of Morgan McCutchen Brigham.

hogs are known carriers of more than 30 bacterial and viral diseases, including many pathogens that can be spread through contact with water.

"We learned through this study that there are some alarming pathogens in the water and feral hogs are implicated in the spread of these pathogens," said Scott Durham, LDWF

Director of Species Management.

The impact to humans and wildlife in the region is particular cause for concern. Many recreational activities in these areas, including swimming, kayaking and hunting, could put humans in direct contact with these pathogens. Humans can become gravely ill from some of

these diseases if misdiagnosed or untreated.

"Given the socio-cultural and economic importance of these species, loss of individuals, reduced condition and reduced fitness could have serious implications for human recreation and local economies," the report said.

DNA fingerprinting indicated

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