

**Bankhead Liaison Panel
Feral Swine Working Group
Meeting Summary
Meeting Date 5/7/2014**

Meeting Location Bankhead National Forest, Ranger District Office, Double Springs

Attendees:

Dave Casey, Bankhead District Ranger

Mike Cook, Bankhead ORA

Allison Cochran, Bankhead Wildlife Biologist

Travis McDonald, Bankhead Biological Scientist

Mike Bagwell

Hank Byrnes

Mark Kolinski, Wild South

Jim Rau

James Horsley

Matt Brock, Alabama DCNR-WFF – Black Warrior WMA Biologist/Area Manager

William Stone, Alabama A&M University

Phillip Barnett

After introductions, Bankhead Ranger Dave Casey welcomed the group to give an update on the feral swine program's progress on Bankhead and to have a discussion on our efforts with feral swine. The Liaison Panel ground rules were reviewed, as this working group will follow that format. Ground rules are attached to this document. The Ranger established there were no preconceived ideas on how often we should meet as a working group. This is a forum for discussion and not a decision making group. A PowerPoint program was developed to aid in discussion. Portions of the PowerPoint were not addressed, as time did not allow. PowerPoint attached.

Prior to reviewing those items of discussion in the PowerPoint program, there was discussion that management actions are influencing the problem of feral swine. Particularly some feel that different hunting regulations and trapping programs in Bankhead vs. Black Warrior vs. Sipsey Wilderness are influencing the problem. Some feel that those different pressures are driving hogs into the wilderness. It was expressed by some that management actions are influencing the nature of the problem with feral swine and how we experience that problem.

The Ranger asked his staff to frame the problem and program related to feral swine prior to this meeting. Questions he asked included is there a problem, what is the problem? Ranger looking at a more basic question and at the scale of the problem with feral swine. For example, are their soil and water impacts, game impacts, etc.

Attendees want to know if FS or State can legally build traps in Wilderness? Ranger responded yes, there is a process. Question how much pressure is there on feral swine? Hunter numbers? Matt Brock replied - not much pressure in the summer due to heat & conditions; there is some illegal night hunting occurring. Questions - is there a process to report harvest? In the WMA, yes harvest reporting is required. In the BNF, no there is no harvest reporting of any game. Is there a way to ask the public to see what the pressure is? Matt reminded the group that hog movement and use is driven more by food availability than pressure.

Attendees wanted to know how much discretionary authority Dave Casey and Matt Brock have. There was a lengthy discussion on the authority Matt and Dave have in using volunteers. Some attendees

expressed an interest in volunteering. There was discussion on how volunteers might be able to be used.

Ranger Casey would like to fully define the problem with feral swine from an all lands approach. That would help develop a comprehensive strategy. We don't know completely if more staff (volunteers) would help the problem. Also, we don't want a shotgun approach; we need someone looking at the big picture and long term. And the FS and WMA need to finely tune what we are currently doing. Potential issue with volunteers, if used, not following that strategy or program. Much discussion on how volunteers might be used, example build traps or monitor sites. A few misdirected volunteers could have negative effects on the feral swine program, as we heard from the Wildlife Services program leader Dana Johnson at the last liaison panel meeting. There may be opportunities for volunteers, but no decision was made at this time on incorporating volunteers into the feral swine program.

Discussion on giving away dispatched swine (meat). Concerns with heat (spoilage) and disease.

Discussion on taking feral swine off of the "game list", or having feral swine reclassified by the state as no-game, nuisance or otherwise. Again, this is not within the purview of this group to decide or recommend. However, it was suggested for future discussion to have a listing of the pros and cons of having hogs being removed from being listed as a game species. Some concern that jurisdiction could be lost depending on how hogs were listed, if not listed as game.

Discussion on how we must be pro-active or the problem will get out of hand. It is a dynamic problem that is different all of the time. Whether or not we think it is bad now, it will get worse. Feral swine are established in the southeast. They are here to stay unfortunately. Is it possible to get the county or others involved in this effort? It is important to note that regardless of what occurs on the National Forest, pigs are established on private lands too and will move back and forth. Again, need to engage others (the community) for an all lands approach.

Discussion on hunting and special hunts on the WMA.

Question of whether FS/WMA using boar buster technique, a drop net system. We are familiar with it, used in open fields (sod farms, golf courses) with some success. Less effective than trap style we are using (corral type trap).

Discussion on educating hunters and general public. We need to be cautious not to create more of a problem than we already have. Advertising hunts, as we have done through media and educational efforts in the past, may have caused more problems by creating a demand for hog hunting & interesting people in illegal releasing pigs onto the National Forest. Discussion on possibility of closing the special feral swine hunts on the WMA.

Question – private landowner surrounded by National Forest. Crop damage caused by hogs on private land. Is there a liability issue? Again, highlighting the need for a cooperative community effort and engage private property owners.

More discussion on the use of volunteers – Volunteers could be used to document impacts, measure whether control is effective or problem is spreading, documenting where damage is occurring, and sharing info on where large groups of pigs are/large evidence of damage.

FS goal on Bankhead re: feral swine control program is to minimize damage. Discussion on how we could move forward and minimize damage if we had no limitations (budget or otherwise). It was suggested that the FS is lagging in not documenting damage and not getting funding, especially as it relates to ecological restoration. Some feel there is a lag in resource management philosophy. FS

shouldn't be pulling \$/effort from other areas to cover feral swine control. Suggestion was to do an evaluation, document the need, and use a systematic approach to documenting resource damage.

Suggestion to meet with Congressman Aderholdt's office to engage and educate the community.

Discussion on Wilderness. Mike Cook described that there are qualities that we must look out for in preserving wilderness character, for example the natural world and human management (untrammled). As Wilderness stewards, we are observing natural processes and wilderness should be getting closer to a natural system on its own. Many visitors see people as a problem in Wilderness, for example not having solitude in the wilderness. Some people might not see having traps in the Wilderness as a good trade off. The Minimum Requirements Analysis is a tool we can get to at some point that may guide us on whether or not to include the Wilderness in the feral swine trapping program. Mike shared information on other federal agencies looking at similar issues with swine and Wilderness (Congaree and Cumberland Island). Many other places are similar to here or further along in the process regarding a MRA and feral swine. Discouraging results on Cumberland Island, after 10 years of feral swine trapping/control program, feral swine still present on that island. Discussion on Wilderness and a constant or perpetual intrusion – if you have to do it constantly to maintain, then it is not appropriate. The question is, is trapping feral swine in the wilderness right now appropriate? It might not be, we might work the perimeter for now. If we get to the point that we are down to only hogs in the Wilderness and nowhere else, then that might be the time to make that decision on whether to trap in the Wilderness. Discussion on trigger point to initiate an MRA. The Ranger doesn't see a need to do an MRA at this point. Mark Kolinski shared that a Threat Assessment was conducted for the Sipsey Wilderness last year. Mark shared that recreational use was identified as the greatest threat to the wilderness character in the Sipsey. In the Wilderness Threat Matrix for the NFs in AL, feral hogs, as the only non-plant non-native invasive species (NNIS), were rated as a more serious threat than NNIS plant species, negatively impacting aquatic systems, soils, vegetation, and wildlife to a moderate degree and impacting the untrammled quality of wilderness character to a high degree. Mark also stated that he is working on a Wilderness Preservation Presentation that he could share at the Bankhead Liaison Panel meeting. Mike Bagwell stated that he would like to see the Forest Service initiate an MRA as he thinks the wilderness is being drastically affected. Mike stated that he wants to see trapping being conducted in the Wilderness. He also spoke with Jimmy Guidry in the Regional Office Wilderness program and he would like for the hog working group to discuss this issue with Jimmy. It was recommended that we share the documentation from the Wild South Wilderness Rangers program with Jimmy. There was discussion on using volunteers to do monitoring, for example with bait stations or other monitoring. Defining the problem is the first part of conducting an MRA. James Horsley expressed his opinion that the Wilderness enthusiasts should deal with the fact that the area is now designated wilderness and that limits actions that can be taken there. There are prohibited uses in the Wilderness and access is limited were key points in the Wilderness discussion. Feral swine are on the landscape, for good, and they are causing a change.

Next steps? The next step is to work on defining a clear path forward.

CONTACT Allison Cochran, jacochran@fs.fed.us, or 205 489 5111, for copy of PowerPoint presentation.