

Feral Swine Hunting Prohibition
Mark Twain National Forest Closure Order 09-05-19-02
December 7th, 2019

Key Messages

The public comment process was critical to understanding public sentiment and helped inform the forest supervisor's decision.

- The Forest Service reviewed the comments and identified ways to incorporate suggestions and new ideas into the approach to eliminate feral swine on National Forest System lands.
- Rather than counting votes for or against, the Forest Service looked at the comments that addressed the size, duration, and justification of the proposed closure.
- During the 60-day public comment period, the Forest Service received 1,284 comment letters, petitions, resolutions and forms. About 150 people attended an open house in Rolla and about 60 people attended the Fredericktown open house.

The forest order is part of a larger effort to control the invasive pest that is responsible for harming the state's agricultural and natural resources.

- The Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership focuses on professionally reducing the feral swine population and limiting the damage swine cause to farmers and landowners across Missouri.
- By taking steps to eliminate feral swine on the Mark Twain National Forest, the closure order may help ease the financial cost the animals cause to Missouri farmers and other land owners.
- Feral swine compete directly with native species and pose a significant threat to native animals and plants and the natural habitats they depend on.

After careful consideration, the Forest Service determined that supporting partner efforts to eliminate feral swine and allowing licensed deer and turkey hunters to kill feral swine provides the best balance for feral swine elimination and conservation of the national forest.

- This decision supports the mission of the Forest Service and the efforts of our partners while incorporating input from the public.
- Using multiple tools, including trapping, aerial gunning, and authorizing licensed deer and turkey hunters possessing a valid State deer or turkey permit to opportunistically kill feral swine on National Forest System lands will help the Forest Service and its partners in feral swine elimination efforts on public lands in Missouri.
- The Forest Service is committed to collaborating with our partners and neighbors to eliminate feral swine in Missouri to protect the state's agricultural and natural resources.

Questions and Answers

Why did the USDA Forest Service need to close the Mark Twain National Forest to feral swine hunting?

Over the last 20 years, the population of feral swine in Missouri has increased significantly, threatening natural resources and agriculture across the state. According to USDA Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service, feral swine cause approximately \$1.5 billion in damages and elimination control costs in the United States each year, with at least \$800 million of this estimate due to direct damage to agriculture.

The forest order is in response to the request from the Missouri Department of Conservation and the Missouri Department of Agriculture to make policies consistent across all public lands in Missouri. The order aligns the management of National Forest System lands with the elimination efforts of the Missouri Department of Conservation and other federal agencies, including USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

How did the Forest Service use comments to make its decision?

Of the 1,284 comments, most either agreed or disagreed with the proposed closure order and about 50 related to the proposed closure order. The Forest Service focused on the approximately 50 comments that addressed the size, duration, and justification of the closure. Comments and responses to the comments are posted online:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/mtnf/landmanagement/?cid=fseprd629017>

How can the USDA Forest Service close the Mark Twain National Forest to feral swine hunting when a number of comments and county resolutions opposed the order?

The Forest Service did not count comments, form letters, resolutions or petitions as votes. Rather, the Forest Service reviewed the comments for information related directly to the proposed order, including the size, duration, and justification of the closure. Based on information provided by commenters, the Forest Service did modify the proposed closure order from the original. The information helped the Forest Service make the decision to implement the closure with the modification that allows hunters possessing a valid State deer or turkey hunting permit to kill swine opportunistically during deer and turkey hunting seasons.

How did the Dingell Act affect the process?

Under the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act, all federal lands are open to hunting and fishing, unless specifically designated otherwise. Because the USDA Forest Service proposed to close Mark Twain National Forest to the hunting of feral swine, the

law required the agency to provide public notice and opportunity for comment. The forest announced the proposal in the Federal Register, newspapers, and on the Mark Twain National Forest website, published the justification online, and held a 60-day public comment period, which included two public open houses.

The Dingell Act also required the Forest Service to respond to those comments specific to the act, which are published with a comment summary online:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/mtnf/landmanagement/?cid=fseprd629017>

What is the Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership and how does the USDA Forest Service work within that partnership?

Mark Twain National Forest is a member of the Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership. The purpose of the partnership is the complete elimination of feral swine from Missouri. The forest closure order will meet the objectives in the statewide strategic plan, which include public outreach, preventing establishment of new populations, and obtaining population metrics. As part of the statewide strategy and implementation, the Forest Service and other partners provide funds, staff, and equipment to the extent possible. In the coming months, professional elimination efforts on the Mark Twain National Forest will ramp up.

How will the USDA Forest Service work with adjacent landowners and farmers trying to remove feral swine from their land?

The Forest Service and the other Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership members encourage adjacent landowners to report feral swine that scatter or move from their land onto NFS land. Reports from the forest's neighbors and the public help with elimination strategies. The Forest Service will regularly communicate with its partners and have an ongoing dialogue with neighbors about actions taking place on the forest.

Will allowing opportunistic take of feral hogs during deer and turkey hunting seasons interfere with trapping efforts on the Mark Twain National Forest?

The agencies focused on feral swine elimination historically have reduced feral swine trapping efforts during the deer and turkey hunting seasons because it is difficult to trap successfully when there are thousands of hunters in the MTNF. An individual who might opportunistically take feral swine while lawfully hunting deer or turkey could do so without significantly interfering with professional trapping efforts. For these reasons, the Forest Order has been revised to include an exemption for persons possessing a valid State deer or turkey hunting permit who are hunting deer or turkey in compliance with the permit.

When will the forest order go into effect and will the Forest Service reopen the Mark Twain to feral swine hunting in the future?

The forest order goes into effect immediately and the closure is indefinite.

Why can't feral hog hunting be part of the solution year-round?

Hunting was the primary management tool used by land management agencies in MO from the early 1990s until 2016. During that 25 year period, the population of feral hogs expanded from 2 watersheds in 1991 totaling approximately 59,000 acres to 383 watersheds in 2016 totaling over 9 million acres. Hunting, especially hunting with dogs, scatters sounders, disrupts professional trapping efforts, and interferes with collaborative interagency efforts to eliminate feral swine in Missouri. Many management agencies nationwide have determined that the approach of allowing recreational feral hog hunting is not an effective elimination tool.

[Additionally, allowing hunting puts a value on feral hogs, which can incentivize some people to release feral hogs on private and public lands for hunting purposes.](#) Rapid range expansion due to intentional releases of feral hogs has been documented in Missouri. If elimination of feral hogs in Missouri is to occur, releases of these animals must be stopped. In 2016, the Missouri Department of Conservation and the LAD Foundation (largest private landowner in the state) recognized that hunting was not an effective feral hog elimination tool and prohibited the hunting of feral hogs on lands they own and lease. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District followed suit with a feral hog hunting prohibition on their lands in 2017. Since 2016, when these hunting prohibitions went into effect, the number of watersheds occupied by feral hogs in Missouri has dropped to 337 totaling approximately 8 million acres—a testament to the effectiveness of professional feral hog elimination efforts.

Why not use all available techniques or tools to eliminate feral hogs?

Shooting in various forms, including over bait, hunting with dogs, night shooting using infrared or thermal technologies, and from fixed-wing or rotary aircraft are all common feral hog control techniques. However, recreational hunting alone has proven ineffective at eliminating populations of feral hogs in many circumstances. Allowing recreational hunting adds value to feral hogs, which incentivizes illegal releases of feral hogs on private and public lands. [This invasive pest needs to be completely eliminated from the Missouri landscape.](#) Additionally, shooting one or two animals at a time can disrupt the professional elimination efforts of trapping entire sounders (herds of feral hogs).

The inability of recreational hunting to control or suppress population growth among feral hogs led [Illinois](#), [Tennessee](#) and [Kentucky](#) to use an adaptive science-based approach, which includes trapping, aerial gunning, and selective shooting. A study from [Hawaii](#) indicated that hunting as a method is limited by the law of diminishing returns. Studies in states such as [Kansas](#), [New York](#), [North Carolina](#), and [Arkansas](#) indicate trapping is the most effective method of controlling feral hog populations.

Isn't the Mark Twain National Forest too big and remote to use interagency efforts exclusively (without hunting)?

The Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership is taking a strategic and incremental approach, clearing watersheds of feral hogs one at a time across the landscape. Since 2016, efforts associated with the [Statewide Strategic Plan for Feral Hog Elimination in Missouri](#) have resulted in the total elimination of feral hogs from 116 watersheds totaling over 2.7 million acres previously occupied by feral hogs. Some of the watersheds where feral hogs have been eliminated fall within the Mark Twain National Forest (MTNF), which is about 1.6 million acres in size. Resources (i.e., field staff and aerial operations) associated with the successful removal of feral hogs from watersheds will be reallocated and concentrated in areas on MTNF lands and adjacent cooperative private lands where feral hogs are distributed.

[Currently, interference, especially from hunters using dogs, prevents feral hog elimination staff from working](#) on most MTNF lands outside of July and August (when it's generally too hot to run dogs). Feral hog elimination staff can't waste time and resources, so they are forced to avoid working in areas where interference occurs. Instead, staff focus on private land where elimination efforts can be more effective. With the feral hog hunting closure order in place, professional feral hog elimination staff will be able to work on MTNF lands year-round, significantly increasing effectiveness. Additionally, the USDA Forest Service, Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), USDA APHIS Wildlife Services, and other partners are working together to obtain additional resources to put toward feral hog elimination on the MTNF once the hunting closure is in effect.

Explain why hunting activities scatter sounders (herds of feral hogs) while trapping or shooting from helicopters does not?

A feral hog trap does nothing to scare or scatter sounders—it sits passively in the forest and provides easily accessible food for feral hogs until the trip wire is activated to drop the trap and capture the entire sounder. When helicopters are used to pursue feral hogs, highly trained sharpshooters begin shooting feral hogs running at the back of sounder first, so it is less likely the group will scatter rather than continue to run together in the same direction. In addition, helicopter operations are coordinated so they don't impact feral hog trapping efforts on the ground.

[Hunting activity, particularly utilizing dogs and ATVs, actively pursues sounders causing the group to scatter and disperse into new areas, form additional groups and become more wary of humans.](#) At Lake Wappapello in Missouri, USDA APHIS Wildlife Services reported the elimination of hunting of feral hogs with dogs resulted in an apparent 212% increase in the number of feral hogs removed from the area using trapping. [The State of Tennessee attempted to control feral hog populations using no bag limits on hunting. They found that during this period of unlimited hunting the wild hog population expanded the most.](#)

Do adult hogs become trap shy and what is the strategy for eliminating these hogs?

Adult feral hogs only become trap shy if they escape from a trap after capture, or if they witness a trapping event without being captured. Trap capture efficiency (i.e., the number of hogs captured with respect to the number of hogs observed in the vicinity of a trap during a capture event) has approximately doubled since the development and deployment of the Missouri Drop Trap. According to USDA APHIS Wildlife Services, the capture efficiency for this trap generally ranges from 90-100% as is evident by the number of hogs captured versus the number of hogs observed in trail camera images prior to the capture event. If an animal has become trap shy, feral hog elimination personnel will use the most efficient methods that do not interfere with other trapping efforts to eliminate that animal. For example, personnel will generally try to keep the animal on bait and conduct removal activity through sharpshooting at night. Snares are used selectively depending on conditions, such as when hogs are damaging agricultural crops.

Why would a bounty system not lead to eradication?

Allowing any activities that may incentivize illegal releases of feral hogs is counterproductive to elimination. Additionally, bounties have been used on a variety of species of wildlife and have never been proven to be effective in eliminating the species. For example, in response to increasing negative impacts on flora, fauna, and military training activities and equipment, Fort Benning began offering a bounty on pigs in June 2007 to reduce the population and eventually eradicate wild pigs from the installation. To gauge the effectiveness of the bounty program, a study was conducted to assess the population response of feral hogs within 2 study areas on the installation from June 2007 to February 2008. The study ([Effectiveness of a Bounty Program for Reducing Wild Pig Densities](#)) results indicated that the wild pig population was increasing during the period when the bounty program was in effect.

What carcass disposal method is being used and why?

Due to the logistics of removing a large number of feral hogs, their carcasses are scattered across the landscape to decompose and provide nutrients back into the ecosystem in which they lived. [Appendix H of the Environmental Impact Statement \(EIS\) prepared by USDA APHIS Wildlife Services](#) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of different way to dispose of feral hog carcasses.

Is feral hog meat safe to handle and eat?

[There are more than 30 viral and bacterial diseases and nearly 40 parasites that humans, pets, livestock and wildlife can get from feral hogs.](#) Most of these diseases make people sick when they eat undercooked meat. [Diseases such as hepatitis E, swine brucellosis, pseudorabies, tularemia, tuberculosis, leptospirosis and trichinellosis are of grave concern to humans who may come in contact with feral hogs.](#) [Feral hogs can act as reservoirs for many important infectious diseases in domestic animals, such as classical swine fever, African swine fever,](#)

[pseudorabies, brucellosis, trichinellosis, and porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome \(PRRS\).](#)

Are there plans to increase staffing and resources to intensify feral hog elimination efforts?

Yes. There are commitments from USDA APHIS Wildlife Services, Missouri Department of Conservation, and other partners to increase resources focused on feral hog elimination efforts on and around the Mark Twain National Forest once the feral hog hunting prohibition is in place. In addition, the USDA APHIS National Feral Swine Damage Management Program has committed an additional two weeks of funding to support aerial gunning efforts in Missouri, with the intent to provide additional feral hog elimination staff. The Mark Twain National Forest is committed to establishing an Incident Command System to lead the Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership's efforts in and around the Forest.

What type of education campaign will be used along with the ban?

The Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership will increase its outreach through talks, radio and television spots informational booths, workshops, etc. when invited or at other public events to provide information on feral hog elimination efforts in Missouri. Currently, some educational information is available on the MDC and APHIS websites.