

Caldwell County Feral Hog Task Force Meeting
1/8/2013

Attending: Nick Dornak (facilitating)-Plum Creek Watershed Partnership
Trey Stoneham – Farm Service Agency
Rick Johnson – Caldwell/Bastrop County Master Naturalists
J. Hess – Lockhart State Park
Johnie Halliburton – Plum Creek Conservation District
Michael Haynes – Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
John Cyrier – Landowner, Former County Commissioner
Jamie Gregg – Helicopter Tours of Texas
R Kent Morrison – BSA Security Training
Steve Van Buren – Helicopter Tours of Texas
Tom Bonn – County Judge, Caldwell County
Jacob Hetzel – USDA Wildlife Services
Megan Compton – SH 130
Joe Sustaita – SH 130
Meredith Longoria – TPWD
Jim Haager – Landowner, Hobby Horse area,
Jana Lloyd – TSSWCB
Debbie Magin – GBRA
Jared Timmons – Feral Hog Specialist

After introductions, Nick Dornak briefed the task force on the success of the 2012 Hog Out Programs in Caldwell and Hays Counties. The Caldwell County will get credit for removing 887 hogs between October and December, based on the \$2 bounties paid out. In addition to these numbers, Caldwell County will get credit for 127 hogs removed by hunts from helicopters for a grand total of 1,014 feral hogs removed. Hays County paid out a \$2 bounty on 110 hogs. Based on the maps that show where the hogs were removed, the majority of the hogs were from the Plum Creek watershed. Nick explained that he has seen an outpouring of support for the programs. He feels that the programs set an example of how successful we can be when we work together.

The Task Force is just getting started, with this being the kick-off meeting. Nick polled the attendees on how they felt the Task Force should proceed. It was the consensus of the members of the Task Force present that the committee should be left informal and Nick would call the meetings, facilitate the meetings and develop the agenda, deliverables and next steps. It was felt that establishment of committee leadership was not necessary at this time but may be established in the future.

The conversation returned to the effectiveness of the Hog Out Program. Nick reported that there was success with a \$2 bounty but that many hogs were unclaimed because hunters felt it was not worth the effort to turn in the tails. Most hunters did not remove the hogs for the money. Nick and Judge Bonn are working on awarding prizes for this year's hunters and will continue to build on this year's program.

Michael Haynes and Jared Timmons discussed the annual feral hog workshop that will be held on February 5, at the Luling Civic Center from 8-3:45 p.m. Five CEU credits can be earned and lunch will be provided at a cost of \$20 (\$30 at the door). This year's workshop will have a speaker from the Animal Health Commission that will give an update on research and recapture data. Jim Cathey is still on the agenda. They are expecting approximately 300 people based on the past year's attendance.

There will be exhibitors at this year's workshop, including helicopter tours. They provide hunts and live netting.

The discussion turned to what we could do as a task force to reduce the numbers of feral hogs in Caldwell County. Based on the Plum Creek Watershed Protection Plan and the knowledge of the feral hog specialist, they are found in the riparian areas of the Plum Creek watershed.

It was felt that the Hog Out Program in Caldwell County benefited from the national attention that was given to the impact of the hogs on the new SH130 toll road. Representatives of SH130 were present at the task force kick off meeting in order to gain information on what is being done in the area for control of the invasive animals. Nick asked Megan Campton and Jacob Hetzel what plans, if any, they might have to reduce the number of hogs along the new roadway. It was felt that the numbers of hogs along the roadway has been reduced. SH130 management is interested in the task force but don't know to what capacity or how. Joe explained that they have done some fly bys and funded some 1-mile perimeter hunts. He was not aware of the outcome of those hunts. They have investigated trapping but have determined that this method is not a good idea. He also mentioned that TXDOT is considering building a fence along the median which might help but will be a challenge due to the changes in geography along the roadway.

Nick asked Steve Van Buren to give the task force members an overview of the activities of Helicopter Tours of Texas. He explained that his company has a permit from TPWD for hog eradication and game surveys. He has landowner permission to hunt hogs on 5-6K acres in the area. These aerial hunts are effective in keeping the population of hogs in check, averaging 44 hogs per hour. Helicopter Tours of Texas is working with Blackstone Security to provide aerial platform shooting training. Helicopter hunts require that the shooters become certified marksmen. They fly a 2-seat helicopter. Mr. Van Buren explained that the biggest challenge is the recruitment of landowners willing to allow the hunts over their property. It will take a good education program to explain the hunts and Mr. Van Buren is hoping that the Task Force can establish a communication link with the landowners. He went on to explain that his organization has met with an aide with Lt. Governor Dewhurst's office to discuss grant funding for flying, and educating landowners. Mr. Van Buren explained that his company cannot advertise for hunters, that his program is for eradication only. They have to be contacted by the landowners. These hunts can be extremely effective when an area is "hit hard and heavy" in the first month and then flown once per month thereafter. Also, there needs to be a quick response time when notified by a landowner that there are hogs on their property, granting the company access to hunt.

Discussion turned to the past studies that were performed by the Texas Department of Agriculture. The study in 2009 recruited landowners to participate in a water quality study along the Clear Fork and West Fork of Plum Creek. The study covered over 40,000 acres from Luling to Umland, with approximately 350 cooperators. The study removed 300+ hogs. The study may provide a list of landowners that could be contacted for hunts in the future.

What is needed now is funding for the hunts, possibly in the form of cost-shares with the landowners. Winter is prime time for aerial hunts because of the reduced canopy and foliage. Infrared systems are available at a high cost but they allow for hunts year round and increase the success rate.

Nick turned the conversation to the funding that could be available from the TDA. Todd Staples, TDA Commissioner is willing to talk to members of the task force. Judge Bonn suggested inviting Staples to

the Fair Participants Appreciation Ceremony and using that event to distribute the awards for the Hog Out. Part of the reason that Todd Staples is interested in the control of feral hogs is their impact on SH130. Also, it was mentioned that the state legislature has allocated \$1M to the TDA to control feral hogs. TDA will decide how to spend the money for abatement activities. A portion of that funding goes to Wildlife Services.

Nick then polled the representatives attending the meeting to see their level of interest in the task force. The Wildlife Management Associations active in the area had representatives at the meeting as well as Meredith Longoria with TPWD who works closely with the WMAs. These representatives stated that the WMAs would be a good place to introduce the need for landowners willing to allow hunts over their properties. The WMAs have a fall and spring meeting each year. Meredith mentioned that the Clear Fork Plum Creek WMA was involved in the 2009 project and was pleased with the results. Meredith also mentioned that she prepares a newsletter that can include information on potential control measures and activities of the task force. The Tri-Community WMA is more spread out over the county and would be another WMA that could be used to target participants in the task force activities.

Rick Johnson with the Caldwell and Bastrop Counties Lost Pines Master Naturalists will share the information he learns today with the membership at their meeting in two weeks. The organization has approximately 100 members, with some overlap with the WMAs. J. Hess with the Lockhart State Park was asked if the trapping of hogs was still going on at the golf course. Mr. Hess said that it had slowed down and offered to help with education of the public. Johnnie Halliburton with the Plum Creek Conservation District was in attendance to gain information to share with his board.

Nick then reviewed action items that had been identified at this kick-off meeting. Nick would contact Todd Staples office to discuss the task force, suggest expansion of the Hog Out program, possibly moving or adding to the months of the program and to invite Commissioner Staples to the awards ceremony. There was a suggestion to create a week-long competition, possibly after deer season.

Judge Bonn suggested that we take advantage of the audience that will be attending the Fair Participants Awards Ceremony to introduce the task force. Nick will work with Michael Haynes, AgriLife Extension Agent to see if there is any way we could present the Hog Out awards at this event.

Jim Haager, local landowner, stated that hunts are highly effective but come with a high cost. He offered that in his area (Elm Creek/Hobby Horse), trapping has had good results as well. He suggested that we look to establish a program that results in donations of the hogs to food banks. It was noted that in order to donate hog meat, the trapped live hogs must be taken to an inspection facility for pre-slaughter inspections by licensed inspectors. The closest holding facilities are located in Gonzales. Judge Bonn volunteered to see if there could be inspectors available locally to save on the cost to transport the hogs to Gonzales. Jared Timmons stated that after the hogs are inspected there are two slaughter houses that are available for processing the hogs, located in Pleasanton and Fort Worth. The meat is then inspected post-slaughter before it can be donated. Jared mentioned that he has issued a new publication on the processing of feral hogs. He stated that hog processing is managed by local businesses. These businesses are required to follow the rules but are allowed to set their own prices.

Funding or volunteers would be needed to cover the cost of inspections, transport and processing. The committee agreed that a program like Jim described sounded very promising and would be a great public relations campaign for promoting alternatives for feral hog control. It was felt that more

investigation is needed but could be done in time for incorporation in the 2013 Hog Out Program in October.

The meeting wrapped up with the suggestion that Nick put together a grant proposal that could be presented to Commissioner Staples. The project could include funding for several methods of control (i.e. hunts, traps), a public education campaign, and the purchase of infrared equipment to allow for hunts throughout the year. Judge Bonn offered that the county or another entity such as GBRA, could establish an account that could accept donations for funding activities of the task force. These donations, along with volunteer hours could be used as a match to TDA funding.

The next meeting of the task force will be February 19 at 10 a.m. Nick will have a draft grant proposal out by February 12 for the committee's review. Debbie Magin will prepare the minutes of this meeting and after his review, Nick will distribute the minutes to the members for their review and comment.