

Star-Telegram

State to reward counties that remove the most wild hogs

Posted Tuesday, Oct. 05, 2010

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ARLINGTON -- With Texas' feral hog population conservatively estimated at more than 2 million, state and local officials have tried to raise awareness among urban and suburban landowners of the risks as the animals continue to multiply statewide.

Using Arlington's River Legacy Parks, where feral hogs have rooted up vegetation and startled the occasional jogger, as a backdrop Monday, Texas Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples declared October "Hog Out Month: Get The Hog Outta Texas!"

He said a new grant program will reward the counties that legally remove the most wild hogs through Oct. 31.

But Staples, a Republican seeking re-election, was accused of playing politics with the program by his Democratic opponent, Hank Gilbert, who said Staples was using the issue to get media attention in the Metroplex.

"This is just another example of Todd Staples using the Texas Department of Agriculture for political purposes by holding a press conference in one of the state's largest media markets and making it sound like counties can still get in on this grant program," Gilbert said in a news release that noted the Sept. 30 deadline.

Raising awareness

Staples' spokesman, Bryan Black, disputed Gilbert's statement that the program was being used for political purposes, saying counties have until Nov. 12 to file a grant application. But they still must file a notice of intent to be part of the program and lose 5 points for each business day after Sept. 30.

"Clearly, we want to get as many counties as possible into the program," Black said. "Our goal is to get rid of as many hogs as possible."

Politics aside, feral hogs aren't likely to go away anytime soon.

Billy Higginbotham, a professor and wildlife extension specialist with the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center in Overton and a feral hog expert, said the animals are far too prolific to be eradicated quickly.

"We cannot eliminate them by trapping and shooting them, but we can control the damage and economic impact to landowners," Higginbotham said.

Within three to five years, there will be contraceptives, bait and other means of targeting feral hogs without harming other wildlife, he said. For now, raising awareness and getting landowners to cooperate will make it easier to control the problem, he said.

More hogs in cities

At River Legacy Parks, Arlington officials have been trying to trap hogs in recent years, and the animals have also affected the nearby Parkway North neighborhood. In July, the hogs were tearing up yards and flowerbeds there.

And this weekend in Southlake, 13 feral hogs were trapped, Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley said. There have also been problems in northwestern Tarrant County, including the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, where officials have trapped them in recent years.

An official at the nature center said this year that the hog population can quickly spiral out of control. He calculated that one boar and one sow can have 62 offspring in 18 months.

To win one of the state hog grants, counties are scored on their accomplishments this month including the number of feral hogs taken, as certified by the county; the number of participants in an approved feral hog education program; and the total acres that landowners give access to county trappers or wildlife specialists to remove feral hogs.

Sixty counties have signed up, including Tarrant County, for the grants: \$25,000 for the high score, \$15,000 for second and \$10,000 for third.

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