

The feral pig (*Sus scrofa*)



Feral pigs are environmental and agricultural pests. They cause damage to the environment through wallowing, rooting for food and selective feeding. They destroy habitat for native plants and animals and spread environmental weeds. Feral pigs destroy crops and pasture and they could spread exotic diseases should there be an outbreak. Research is continuing into techniques that will control feral pigs and minimise the damage they cause to native plants and animals.

History

Domestic pigs were brought to Australia at the time of European settlement as a food source, and were transported around the country by 19th century settlers. Initially, the pigs that escaped or were allowed to wander were associated with human habitation, but truly feral colonies eventually became established. Their spread — mainly along watercourses and floodplains — is not well documented, but by the 1880s feral pigs reached such numbers that they were considered a pest in parts of New South Wales. Today, between 13 million and 23 million feral pigs are spread across about half of the continent, from western Victoria, through New South Wales into Queensland, and across northern Australia. Isolated populations are found on a few offshore islands.

Ecology

Because they need to drink daily in hot weather, feral pigs are not found in the dry inland. In hot weather, they are usually found within two kilometres of water. Densities vary depending on conditions, with about one feral pig per square kilometre in eucalypt woodland, forest and grazing land, and as many as 10–20 in wetlands and seasonally inundated floodplains. Feral pigs are active from late afternoon to early morning. They eat a wide range of foods including plants and small animals, and they will scavenge on dead animals. Adult male feral pigs (boars) generally roam alone over an area of up to 43 square kilometres, while females (sows) range over areas smaller than 20 square kilometres.

During dry conditions, groups of up to 100 pigs may gather around waterholes. To breed, a male joins a group of 12–15 females. Feral pigs can breed from the age of 7–12 months, and usually produce one or two litters of about six piglets each year. Many piglets are lost to dingos and wild dogs, starvation and loss of contact with their mother.

Impact

Environmental damage caused by feral pigs can be hard to measure. By wallowing and rooting around the edges of watercourses and swamps, they destroy the vegetation that prevents erosion and provides food and nesting sites for native wildlife. They compete with native animals for food, pose a threat to ground-nesting birds, and can spread environmental weeds. Feral pigs have destroyed breeding sites and degraded key habitats of the endangered white-bellied frog, orange-bellied frog and corroboree frog.



Distribution of feral pigs in Australia

Adapted from: Clarke GM et al (2000). *Environmental Pest Species in Australia*. Internal report, Department of the Environment and Heritage, Canberra.



Because feral pigs need regular access to water, especially in hot weather, traps built around waterholes can be an effective way to control them. Photo: P Fleming, NSW Agriculture

Feral pigs can be a serious agricultural pest. They cause losses of an estimated 20 000 tonnes of sugarcane each year. In some areas, they kill and eat up to 40% of newborn lambs. Feral pigs could also carry diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease and swine fever, should those diseases be accidentally introduced.



Feral pigs have caused environmental damage at Smokers Gap in Namadgi National Park, ACT. Photo: Jim Hone

Control

A number of techniques are available to control feral pigs. In open country, mustering and shooting from helicopters can be effective in the short term, and pigs shot in the wild may be used for their meat. In the mid-1990s, exports of 'wild boar' meat were worth \$10–20 million annually.

Traps baited with grain can be used to control feral pigs. Traps are built near areas where pigs are active, such as watering holes. Land-holders often leave traps permanently erected, only activating the gate when pig activity is evident. Poisoning is also used as a control method for feral pigs but there are risks of poisoning non-target animals. Electric fences are used to protect small areas of high conservation priority from feral pigs. Research is currently focusing on improving knowledge of pig biology and the impact of feral pigs on the environment.

How the Australian Government is dealing with a national problem

Predation, habitat degradation, competition and disease transmission by feral pigs is listed as a key threatening process under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act). Under the EPBC Act the Australian Government in consultation with the states and territories has developed the *Threat Abatement Plan for Predation, Habitat Degradation, Competition and Disease Transmission by Feral Pigs*.

The threat abatement plan aims to reduce the impacts of feral pigs on native wildlife and habitats by:

- preventing feral pigs from becoming established in areas where they do not yet occur and where they are likely to pose a threat to nationally listed threatened species and ecological communities
- quantifying the impact that feral pigs have on nationally listed threatened species and ecological communities
- increasing awareness and understanding of the damage that feral pigs can cause and what can be done about it
- promoting a coordinated and integrated approach to managing the damage that feral pigs cause
- improving the effectiveness and humaneness of techniques and strategies for managing the damage caused by feral pigs.

Feral pig control programs also need to be coordinated with other activities that may be taking place, including the on-ground protection of threatened plants and animals and control of other invasive species such as feral goats and rabbits. The threat abatement plan provides a framework that will enable the best use of the resources available for feral pig management. The Australian Government works with the states and territories to deal with this national problem.

More information about the threat abatement plan can be found at <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/tap/pigs/index.html>

Further reading:

Choquenot D, McLroy J and Korn T (1996).
Managing Vertebrate Pests: Feral Pigs.
Bureau of Resource Sciences, Canberra.

Illustration of feral pig by Karina Hansen McInnes

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For further information, contact:



Australian Government
Department of the
Environment and Heritage

GPO Box 787 Canberra ACT 2601
Phone: 1800 803 772
Web site: <http://www.deh.gov.au>



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