**$1M pilot project aims to take out feral pigs**

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Using the cover of darkness, feral pigs have learned to outsmart even the most seasoned hunters as they set about on their nightly terrors, rooting up crops and suburban gardens, harassing native wildlife and turning watering holes into pigsties.

The invasive porkers have made themselves at home across more than three quarters of the U.S. and are responsible for an estimated $1.5 billion in damages each year. Most worrisome is their ability to learn from each encounter with a frustrated human.

Ask anyone who has had a run-in with feral pigs. The conversation always circles back to intelligence.

"They're much brighter than I am," said Ray Powell, a veterinarian and New Mexico's land commissioner. "If they had the dexterity, they'd be driving vehicles around. I mean these guys are really smart."

Feral pigs have already taken over Texas and are expanding their numbers in other states, but federal and state land managers think they have a chance to tip the balance in New Mexico. They're willing to bet $1 million in federal funds on a yearlong pilot project aimed at eradicating the pigs and using what they learn here to keep them from gaining a foothold elsewhere.

It marks the first time the U.S. Department of Agriculture has teamed up with a state to develop a comprehensive plan for getting rid of the pigs.

A small army of state and federal employees has been trained to stalk, trap and kill New Mexico's feral pigs. Various techniques have been used by wildlife managers and landowners for decades in the fight against feral swine, but the New Mexico team is focusing on determining what combination works best in which circumstances and how effectively helicopters can be to track the pigs across vast landscapes.

"We're trying to get ahead of the curve with this so we can prevent a lot of the damage that we know will be coming if we don't do anything about it," said USDA Wildlife Services state director Alan May. "Sport hunting pressure alone won't be enough to stop a population from spreading."

Timing is a big part of the project, said UDSA undersecretary Edward Avalos. Hitting the pigs quickly will prevent them from becoming more educated, he said.

Pigs have been known to scope out traps for days before sending in the group's lowest ranking members to test for danger. And if a trap isn't built just right, the pigs will find a way out, either by climbing over each other or squeezing under the fencing.

The plan calls for building special traps in strategic locations along with stalking the pigs at night.

The team will also be looking to the "Judas pig" for help. After trapping a family of pigs, all but one — usually an adult female — are shot and killed. The Judas pig is then fitted with a radio collar or microchip so it can be tracked as it looks for another group of pigs to hang out with.

This is important since feral pigs are quite elusive. Rarely seen during the day, they have learned to avoid being taken down by rifles or suckered into traps.

Their intelligence, in combination with their ability to mate year-round, is what has enabled wild pigs to evade capture and take over prairies, mountain valleys and rugged deserts from Canada to Mexico.

The wild pig population in the U.S. has ballooned to more than 5 million. In one year alone, federal managers trapped and killed more than 32,000 pigs from 28 states and collected thousands of samples to check for the nearly three dozen diseases feral pigs are capable of carrying and passing on to humans, livestock and other wildlife.

Introduced by Spanish explorers centuries ago, pigs began to expand their range. Hunters complicated matters by importing Eurasian boars to the U.S. for sport. Generations in the wild, the pigs have evolved into "survivors," willing to eat just about anything and capable of traversing some of the most rugged territory.

Ranchers and farmers have complained for years about the damage feral pigs can cause, but federal and state officials said the loss of crops, the spread of noxious weeds as the pigs carry seeds to new spots and the stress they put on endangered species and other wildlife is now worse due to a persistent drought that has hammered two-thirds of the country.

New Mexico is embarking on its third straight year of drought, water supplies have dipped to record lows, farmers and ranchers are struggling, and there are now signs of feral swine in 22 of the state's 33 counties.

"Here, it's a new problem," said Quay County farmer Donnie Bidegain, who has seen pig numbers in his area grow from zero to nearly 300 over the last two years. "You research, read stuff on the Internet and watch videos of how other guys are trying to do it. It's almost like you have to stalk them for two months before you figure out how they operate."

Bidegain has to watch for big potholes left behind by the pigs to keep from damaging his tractor. Nearby, Quay County rancher Bill Humphries said the pigs were responsible for leaving "bomb craters everywhere" along a quarter-mile stretch of road on his family ranch. On other ranches, pigs have learned to break the floats in stock tanks to keep water flowing for their mud baths.

In Mississippi, peanut farmers often wake to find uprooted plants. In Texas, where there are an estimated 2.6 million pigs, the animals have moved from destroying pastures and crops to tearing up suburban gardens.

Texans spend about $7 million a year on trying to control pigs and repair some of the damage, said Billy Higginbotham, a professor and wildlife specialist at the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center.

"We're not like New Mexico, Nebraska or Kansas, for example, where we're just beginning to get a few and can probably think in terms of eradication," he said. "What we're simply trying to do here is not even use the "e'' word — eradication — but to think in terms of managing the damage."

Wildlife managers had complained for years about a lack of manpower and money to fight the growing pig problem. Now, they say the pilot program will enable them to systematically take out populations that are centered along the Canadian and Pecos rivers in eastern New Mexico, in the Bootheel and along the Middle Rio Grande, home to thousands of acres of irrigated farmland.

Feral pigs are also moving into southeastern New Mexico, where the federal government has been trying to boost the number of sand dune lizards and lesser prairie chickens. Both are on the menu for pigs.

Pig experts say patience is key, and federal wildlife specialist Ron Jones knows this well. He has been stalking pigs in eastern New Mexico since the first group was spotted in Quay County in 2006. He has spent the last few weeks trying to outsmart an older black and white spotted male that's missing half an ear.

"I've watched him on the trail cameras," Jones said. "He's got some age on him and he's very educated. He has probably had everything in the book thrown at him."

USDA officials couldn't say how long it might take to push the pigs out of New Mexico, but Avalos said he is confident it's possible.

If not, Powell warned New Mexico's agriculture and natural resources will be in trouble.

"It could have enormous costs," he said.