

New rules called for to cope with wild pigs

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Several mornings over the last few months Lud McCrary has suffered unusual delays on his way to work at Big Creek Lumber in Davenport.

He has had to stop to kill a wild pig.

Not only did he have to pause to kill, he had to bleed and gut the creature as well, under state Fish and Game regulations that stipulate slain feral pigs must be "field dressed."

Then he has had to summon volunteers from soup kitchens and drug-abuse centers to come get the meat and distribute it to the needy.

Because pigs are classified as game animals, their meat must be put to good use.

McCrary is one of a growing number of Santa Cruz County residents who want the laws governing feral pigs relaxed.

McCrary and other members of a county Feral Pig Subcommittee will soon turn over to the Board of Supervisors a list of recommendations on how to deal with the growing porker problem.

The recommendations include strongly lobbying the state to reclassify feral pigs as an "exotic pest." The group also wants the county to establish a feral pig hotline and hire a pig coordinator who would oversee a pig-abatement program.

The pigs, in unknown numbers, have rooted up entire acres of crops and sensitive native plants, McCrary said. He said he has seen groups of 30 pigs roaming together. The pigs range from the mountain ranches surrounding Watsonville through the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park to the North County, where McCrary alone trapped 20 pigs this winter.

"They root up pastures. They like clover," McCrary said. "And they like worms and bugs in the ground. You should see a pasture after they've been through it. It looks just like you ran a big Rototiller over it."

State parks officials are also concerned about the havoc wreaked by marauding pigs.

Pigs have rooted up ancient Indian campsites, unearthing and damaging artifacts, said Jerry Fialho, superintendent of the Santa Cruz Mountains district of the state parks department.

They are also eating up the San Francisco garter snake, which is an endangered species, Fialho said. The pigs could cause the snake's extinction if they aren't stopped.

Pigs are becoming an urban problem as well, in the Mid-county area.

McCrary recently helped trap five pigs on the Cabrillo College campus, about 100 yards from the day-care center.

"They were young boars (males, with tusks), hanging out in the brush near the day-care center," McCrary said. "These are real aggressive pigs. They could have hurt a child."

The last earthly remnants of the Cabrillo pigs were consumed by diners at the New

Life Center soup kitchen, said Alice Harper, another pig subcommittee member.

The pigs are trapped live and then shot at close range, Harper and McCrary explained.

No one on the subcommittee wants to see the pig meat wasted, Harper, McCrary and Fialho agreed.

But it is difficult rounding up charities who can come out on short notice and take charge of pig carcasses.

"If nobody wants to come get them, we want to be able to dispose of them," Fialho said. "We want a little loosening up on that."

Subcommittee members are also leery of issuing an open invitation to sport hunters to come in and shoot pigs.