

County forms committee to deal with growing wild-pig problem

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Just when you think there is a committee for everything, bureaucracy will surprise you.

A move is now afoot in Santa Cruz County government to form a "feral pig committee."

County Supervisor Gary Patton is leading the campaign to form the committee and has asked a dozen people in the county with expertise, experience or interest in feral (wild) pigs to join the committee.

Although it sounds a little frivolous, the problem is actually very serious to many in Santa Cruz County.

Feral pigs are descendants of domesticated pigs that have been wild for many years. The generations in the wild have produced an animal that more resembles a wild boar than a domesticated pig.

The pigs like to eat bulbous plants such as onions and iris that grow in wet, marshy areas and river banks. In digging out the roots of the plants, the pigs can cause erosion and contaminate the water supply.

The pigs also eat snakes and birds' eggs found among the plants.

A large feral pig population has been a problem for many years in the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park, and in the last several years the pig population has been increasing in the area along the coast north of Santa Cruz and into Big Basin State Park.

Because of the difficulty in preventing the increase of the feral pig population in the county, Patton has proposed the formation of a committee in order to develop some sort of program to control the animals.

Many facets of the feral pig issue have made the problem a complicated one for the county to deal with.

"For one thing, they're hard to catch, and they breed prolifically," Patton said. "Then, they're listed by Fish & Game as a game animal. So if you catch up with them, there are many regulations on how to kill them or what to do with them."

For instance, if a feral pig is killed by a hunter, the animal's meat must be field-dressed, preserved and not go unused. Feral pigs can weigh up to 400 pounds and anyone hunting the pigs to control the population would have an incredible amount of work before them, Patton said.

Hunting, of course, could not go on within the boundaries of any state park.

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That poses another problem for Jerry Fialho, superintendent of the Santa Cruz Mountains Parks and Recreation District, who sees the destruction of native plants and animals in the parks because of the feral pig.

The feral pigs first took root in California in the late 1700s when domesticated pigs got loose from Spanish settlers.

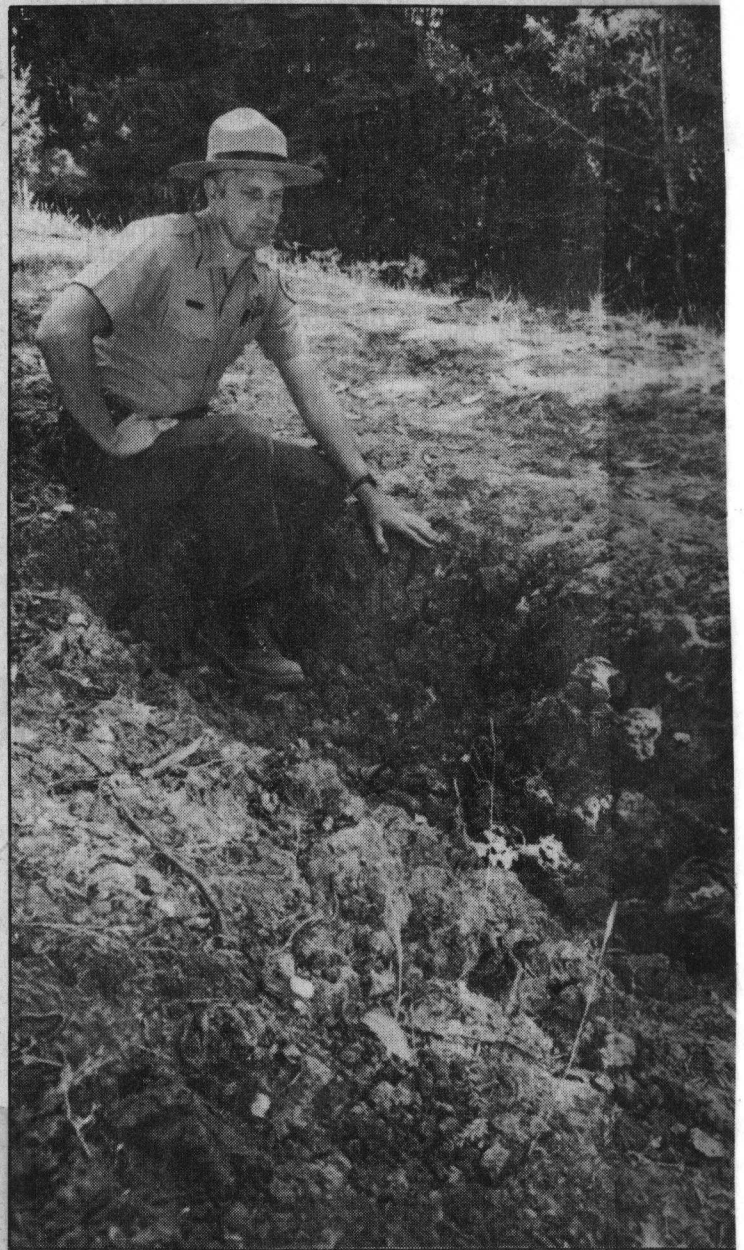
The problem was exacerbated in the early 1900s, when many pigs got away from a Monterey gameherder.

In Nisene Marks park, where the problem is considered the worst, Fialho said there have been estimates of up to 300 feral pigs within the park boundaries.

He said other state parks had started a system of fencing to contain the feral pigs. But fencing requires a tremendous amount of maintenance and is therefore expensive, he said.

Even if the feral pigs are caught and transported off the land to other areas where they could be controlled, there are many problems, some said.

Bud McCrary, of Big Creek Lumber Co. near Davenport, said his brother, Lud, recently caught 10 feral pigs in a trap pen he built. The problems he had with getting through the many Fish &



File photo
Ranger Jerry Waggoner checks erosion caused by wild pigs at Forest of Nisene Marks.

Game regulations just to transport the animals to an area where they could be controlled were frustrating and tedious, McCrary said.

It is the easing of state restrictions such as these that Patton would like to see the committee accomplish.

But in order to function as a committee, the group may need some assistance from county government staff and some funding.

"I'm hoping the Board (of Supervisors) will provide some staff for us," Patton said. "That's something I can't do by myself. I'll also talk with the board on how we can fund this."

The fledgling feral pig committee will hold its first meeting Jan. 13.

REFERENCE