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Feral pig management

Baiting and trapping process

The success of your baiting and trapping program is determined by how well you free feed.

Free feeding

Free feeding is the process of feeding feral pigs non-toxic grain to draw in the maximum number of feral pigs possible to your control site.

It's natural for groups of feral pigs to come together on food sources and free feeding mimics this trait. Effective free feeding not only attracts (and retains) the resident feral pigs to your control site but often attracts lone feral pigs or feral pigs that might wander through the area over time. These additional feral pigs are attracted to free feed sites from the smell of grain, scat and the smell of other feral pigs that they come across.

It is a legal requirement that at least three nights of free feeding be undertaken before baiting feral pigs, but generally effective free feeding takes much longer than this (often 14-21 days). So, budget your time and the required quantity of free feed grain accordingly.

Feral pig baiting and trapping works best when food and water is limited, and feral pigs are resource stressed.

Selecting bait or trap sites

Key consideration when selecting free feeding and subsequent baiting and trapping sites include:

- looking for signs of feral pigs to determine location/s that might be suitable to place the free feed
- pig numbers can easily be underestimated so allow for multiple free feed sites
- pigs can be finicky eaters so initially test a small quantity of different free feed materials in different locations to determine the best combination
- sites must be able to exclude livestock, so place feed in:
 - paddocks with no stock
 - fenced dam squares or fenced-off paddock corners.

Try to select sites that will make access and feeding over a period of time easy. When planning to use a trap, ensure there is shade for trapped pigs.

Signs of feral pig presence

Signs of feral pig presence include:

- Rooting - Pigs use their snouts and teeth to dig for underground food, including small animals and tubers, particularly where soil is soft or after rain. The result varies from selective uprooting of specific types of plants to the creation of extensive areas resembling ploughed paddocks. The distribution of rooting areas is a reliable guide to the location of pigs at night.
- Crop damage - Pigs damage crops by eating them, trampling and bedding in them, and uprooting seed and seedlings. Significant damage over a short period of time can be seen during crop planting, especially in legume and pulse crops such as chickpea and faba beans. Damage is also common at the end of the growing season, as crops mature and the protein content of grain increases, improving palatability.
- Fence damage – Pigs will push through fences, usually enlarging an existing gap under the bottom wire; these holes are then used by other animals. Mud or coarse bristly hair on the wire or post indicates pigs.
- Pads – Pigs often create pads when travelling in single file to frequently used food and water sources. Pads can be a reliable sign of pigs and are often an effective way of identifying pig bedding and feeding areas.
- Tracks - Pigs leave hoofprints in any soft surface. Their tracks have a distinctive square shape and can often be differentiated from other cloven hooved animals by the presence of two widely separated dew claws.
- Faeces – Pigs defecate on and off pads. The size, shape and consistency of the scat varies with age and diet, but it is typically 3-6 cm wide, 7-22 cm long and well formed. Close examination will reveal finely chewed plant matter, grain and occasional bone fragments, pig bristles, and wool or other hair.
- Tusk-marks - Adult boars slash the trunks of growing trees with their tusks, leaving a distinctive pattern of cut-marks. The trees selected for cutting and rubbing are often next to pads and near water. Because boars stand on toes and reach up when tusk-marking, the height of the mark can be a guide to the size of the pig. Marking may serve to notify other boars of the marker's presence and size.
- Nests - Just before farrowing, sows make nests from the available vegetation, which they uproot and carry by mouth. If long, grassy vegetation is plentiful, the nest can be very large – up to 3 m by 1.5 m and 1 m high, with a domed roof. For the first 1– 5 days of life, the piglets stay in the nest and the sow is usually also inside or nearby. In cold temperatures boars and non-farrowing sows may also build and use nests. Nests are usually less than 2 km from permanent water.
- Wallows – Pigs wallow by lying in moist or wet areas, often near permanent water. Wallowing may help to control the animal's temperature and protect it against insects and external parasites. Wallows are distinctive oval depressions in mud and can show how recently and for how long pigs have been in the area.
- Mud-rubs - After wallowing, pigs often rub their heads, shoulders and sides on nearby vertical objects such as tree trunks and fence posts. The result is a distinctive muddy rub site at pig height. Thick coarse hairs are often found embedded in mud-rubs.

Process – free feeding

To start place 10-15 kg (a large bucket) of clean good quality grain at your selected site/s, where you have identified feral pig sign.

Make small piles of 2-3 kgs in a checkerboard or concentric circle pattern to enable all pigs to feed and avoid being bullied by dominant pigs. Pigs can be very territorial and aggressive around feed sites (even within family groups) so having the small piles placed in a way that all pigs can access the grain will help.

Place the grain straight on the ground as anything new you place out in the environment is something else that takes a little time for pigs to become comfortable with.

Preferably put out multiple sites of free feed for the one group of pigs: let them decide where they prefer to eat.

Figure 1. Free feed in areas of active pig sign such as pig pads (L) and where pigs might congregate when resources are scarce (R). (Photos: Troy Crittle)



Check the sites every day to assess and adjust the free feed put out.

If feral pigs eat all the grain increase the amount by 50%. Aim to have 5-10% of the grain put out each night uneaten each morning.

It may take a 3-5 days before pigs start to eat the free feed; they might just walk through it at first! It's hard to pick what influences, but sometimes:

- the subordinate pigs will wait for a group leader to try the free feed before eating it themselves
- it may be useful to feed the same group of pigs at another site close to water or bedding areas.

It is common for pigs to refuse to eat at some sites for no obvious reason. There is no need to introduce attractants, such as carasweet, or fermented grain until you've free fed for at least a week without success.

Free feed for 4-5 nights before introducing a trap or other exclusion device such as bait boxes.

Once the feral pigs start feeding keep the experience positive. Any kind of disturbance such as shooting or chasing with dogs will reduce the effectiveness of your program. The pigs might even leave the area altogether.

Provide feral pigs with a positive experience at your free feed site, limit disturbance, provide sufficient good quality grain.

Which grain to use?

Feral pigs generally prefer grain that is less prickly in their mouth. So, in order of preference for cereals respectively wheat, barley, and oats. However, manufactured pellets may also be used.

Never use seed grain that has been treated in preparation for sowing (it often has a reddish coating). While pigs will often eat it, when it is exposed to moisture (including 1080 solution) it can react and give off an unpleasant taste.

Do not change the type of free feed used once the feral pigs have started to eat it. It is also very important to use the same type of grain when you trap or poison the pigs.

How much grain?

It is common to underestimate the amount of free feed required. For example, a family group of 3-4 sows and young might have a 25 kg maximum nightly feed of grain. So, for that group you would need at least 350 kg of grain for 14 nights.

When to bait or set the trap?

Look for the plateau which is when the free feed eaten each night is consistent.

You can be reasonably confident after 10 – 14 days that most of the feral pigs in the area are at your site. You can then begin the control phase of the program. However, also look for signs that feral pigs are comfortable at the site. This includes signs like pigs:

- rooting up the soil around the area
- laying down close to the feed site
- being seen during daylight hours.

Trail cameras are useful but not essential on control sites. If available, they can be used as a learning tool to determine what is happening at the site/s.

Figure 2. Pigs laying down at a free feeding site (L) and eating free feed grain (R) (Photos: Bec Gray)



Process - baiting

1080

Only Local Land Services Authorised Control Officers can prepare bait and/or supply it to land managers in NSW.

Always use the same grain used in the free feed for the bait (toxic) feed. Present the bait in the same way as the free feed – so all feral pigs coming to the site can feed on it.

Provide 75% of the amount of grain provided for the last free feed as the bait amount. The pigs will not eat the full amount of the 1080 bait as they stop eating when the 1080 takes effect (normally about 1.5-2 hours). The less 1080 bait left over means the less that needs to be picked up for appropriate disposal.

Place 1080 signs at the bait site at least 1.8 m off the ground and not on top of the site. Sometimes the signs placed incorrectly can baulk the pigs from eating.

Refer to the [NSW Vertebrate Pesticide Manual](https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/biosecurity/vertebrate-pests/publications/nsw-vertebrate-pesticide-manual) (<https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/biosecurity/vertebrate-pests/publications/nsw-vertebrate-pesticide-manual>) for more details on 1080.

Figure 3. 1080 grain placed in a checkboard pattern pre (L) and post (R) feeding (Photos: Bec Gray)



Using exclusion devices

Exclusion devices, such as a Hoghopper™ or Hogmat are very useful and may be used where there is risk of non-target access to bait on the ground. Only introduce the devices after you have successfully free fed after 4 to 5 days. Introduce them fully open to fully closed over 4 to 5 nights. It also helps to remove any unsuccessful free feed sites in the area now.

Once feral pigs are accessing your exclusion device in the fully closed position then allow for another 2-3 nights of free feeding for pigs to become practiced in using them.

Sodium nitrite

Hoggone® Is a commercially produced feral pig pesticide containing micro encapsulated sodium nitrite as its active ingredient (at 100g/kg). Hoggone® is a Schedule 6 poison and is available through rural retailers in NSW. It is applied as a peanut-based paste in a foil tray.

Hoggone® users must free feed pigs in a manner similar to grain baiting with 1080 but this baiting approach also involves free feed with a non-toxic placebo. Baiting must also be carried out in the prescribed bait box or Hog hopper®.

See <https://animalcontrol.com.au/products/hoggone-mesn-feral-pig-bait-box>

Post baiting

Start the clean up as early as possible and:

- always pick up residual bait bury any vomit and walk around the bait site as far as practicable (most carcasses will be found within 350 m of the bait site)
- bury carcasses if it is practical to do so
- take spare 1080 grain bags to shovel uneaten bait and vomit into them for later burial either at the site or off site. The blue 1080 dye normally turns to a green colour in the vomit.

Process - trapping

There are many different trap designs. Panel traps with a flat door built into one panel are easier to adapt to larger or smaller groups, quick to set and dismantle and they pack flat for transport. Whatever trap design is used make sure to peg and tie the trap down securely and use a gate that feral pigs can push through once the gate is triggered.

Free feed for 4-5 nights before introducing the trap. Once pigs are eating the grain on the ground regularly, introduce the trap.

Once you have pigs feeding inside the trap for 4-5 nights, introduce the trap door. A small length of chain from the end of the trap door to the top of the trap will allow the door to rise and fall and the bigger pigs can feel this on their back as they enter and leave the trap. Make sure to leave a gap of 30 cm between the bottom of the door and the ground.

It is very important to maximise your catch by training pigs how to enter the trap once the door drops down. This is critical in removing as many pigs in a group as possible and not developing negative trap associations with pigs on the outside of the trap.

Continue free feeding for another 3-4 nights like this or longer until you are confident the pigs are trained in using the gate.

Figure 4. A simple trap design using panels and a flat door in one panel (Photo: Troy Crittle)



Setting the trap

There is no need to “overthink” the trap door trigger mechanism. A stick about 30-40 cm long will do the job. Test the door fall and make sure the stick doesn’t jam in the door. Angling the stick backwards away from the door will help to prevent the door jamming.

Tripwires work well but need to be remade after each capture (as the pigs destroy them).

Figure 5. A simple stick (L) can be an effective door trigger. Feral pig trap containing 59 pigs (R) demonstrating that all feral pigs even small ones can be easily trained to push into trap doors. (Photos: Troy Crittle)



Destroying the pigs

Check your traps as early in the day as possible. If there are feral pigs in the trap park about 30-40 m away from the trap, and approach quietly on foot. Try to avoid talking or making sudden movements.

Although it is common to use a .22 long rifle with this calibre, shot placement is critical. A .22 magnum is better suited to destroying pigs in a trap.

Iron sights or red dot sights (with no magnification) are more suitable for humane destruction of pigs at close range. Avoid using rifles with telescopic sights.

Place the barrel of the rifle through the trap mesh and have the muzzle pointing downwards. This is much safer than shooting from outside the trap.

Load the rifle and wait quietly for the pigs to turn and look towards you. Aim above and between the eyes. Alternately if the pig is looking sideways aim for the temple behind the eyes.

With smaller calibre rifles, aim the rifle so that the projectile strikes the skull perpendicular. This allows good penetration into the skull cavity.

Ensure the target pig is dead before shooting another pig and if in doubt shoot it again. An easy way to check if the animal is dead is to touch the eye with the end of the rifle barrel to check if there is a blink reflex. When there is a blink reflex the pig should be shot again.

Remove the dead pigs from the trap (using gloves and PPE).

Continue free feeding. Remember that any new pigs in the area will need to be retrained in entering the trap.

Figure 6. Pigs being shoot in a pig trap (Photo: Troy Crittelle)



More Information

NSW

NSW Code of Practice and Standard
Operating procedures for the Effective and
Humane

Management of Feral Pigs:
https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1394648/Code-of-Practice-and-Standard-Operating-Procedures-for-the-Effective-and-Humane-Management-of-feral-pigs.pdf

Local Land Services feral pig advice:
<https://www.lls.nsw.gov.au/help-and-advice/pests,-weeds-and-diseases/pest-control/pest-species-control/feral-pigs>

Regional Strategic Pest Animal Management
Plans:

<https://www.lls.nsw.gov.au/help-and-advice/pests,-weeds-and-diseases/pest-control/pest-species-control>

National

PestSMART:

<https://pestsmart.org.au/>

National Feral Pig Action Plan:

<https://feralpigs.com.au/the-plan/>

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