

Oklahoma is preparing to up its game in 2020 against an opponent that is clever, damaging and relentless – the feral hog. With a \$1.04 million grant courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the 2018 Farm Bill, the Oklahoma Conservation Commission is set to ramp up efforts against hogs in a pilot program that will concentrate on Kay County in the north and Harmon, Jackson, Cotton and Tillman counties in the Western Red River region. Nationwide, the USDA’s Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program, funded by the 2018 Farm Bill, directed up to \$33.75 million toward partnership programs with landowners in parts of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas. Historically a free-range managed food source in select areas, feral hogs have exploded across the country, especially in the past few decades. The USDA estimates more than 5 million feral swine cause approximately \$1.5 billion in damage and control costs annually, much of it in damage to crops. The Conservation Commission and county conservation districts are taking up the challenge in Oklahoma along with the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service – the agency with primary responsibility for feral hog control, to carry out the pilot program. The main tools in the fight are those that have proven most effective so far, large remote-controlled traps such as the BoarBuster developed at the Noble Research Institute and helicopter gunning by APHIS agents. “Our role will be working the landowners through the conservation districts, that’s our expertise,” said Tray Lam, commission executive director. Lam compared the pilot program to other community volunteer efforts, such as those that targeted the boll weevil in cotton growing regions beginning in the 1970s and others that have targeted invasive mesquite and red cedar. “We will be doing a lot of outreach and bringing in landowners to document where the hogs are and we will have people to help with setting up the traps and baiting the hogs with corn, but we really feel like the trappers working for APHIS will be the ones to decide when to trigger the traps.” The grant covers the Conservation Commission efforts in outreach and

purchasing new traps that are large suspended â€œcorral trapsâ€• capable of trapping an entire family of hogs with one push of a button on a mobile phone similar to the BoarBuster developed at the Noble Institute. â€œThe current trappers are stretched thin across the state, but they have the expertise,â€• Lam said. â€œIf we can coordinate with the landowners and place the traps that frees up the trappers to do the actual trapping and put their expertise to use.â€• APHIS agents will do fly-overs of targeted areas and public meetings will be planned to work with farmers and to set up field visits to assess where the feral hog damage is the greatest in given areas, he said. Lam said, for example, he imagines a concentrated effort on one edge of the pilot program area that will work its way across the area. He said Texas also won a grant and will mirror efforts on the other side of the Red River. â€œWeâ€™ll be working pretty closely with them,â€• he said. The Kay County program is aimed at stemming the flow of feral hogs into Kansas, he said. â€œThey do have some feral hogs in Kansas but not like Texas,â€• he said. Details of the plan will be worked out early in 2020 and he expects the program elements to be â€œon the groundâ€• in the spring. The overall vision is to get most of the hogs out of an area with a concentrated effort and then follow that up with a â€œmaintenance period.â€• After that the hope is to leave the high-tech traps with the conservation districts or another cooperative group that can deploy the traps in the future where they might be needed, he said. Depending on how the pilot program plays out across the country, more funds could turn up in the Farm Bill for another round of programs and the chance to apply what is learned to other areas of the state, he said. â€œWe will learn a lot in this pilot project,â€• he said. â€œWe donâ€™t know all the answers.â€•

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