

Environmental impacts of feral pigs



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Females reach sexual maturity at 25kg, or around 6 months of age, and can have multiple litters of 4-10 piglets a year with available resources. The current population is estimated at 23.5 million feral pigs across Australia.

Feral pigs are incredibly adaptable and highly destructive pests. They can breed rapidly to recover from control programs or droughts, and the impacts of feral pigs are intensified when their populations are large.

In agriculture, their damage can be quantified through financial costs, including lost yields, reduced production and maintenance expenses.

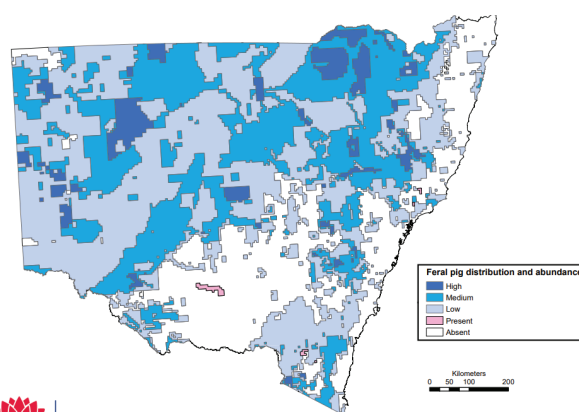
However, the environmental toll of feral pigs is harder to measure. Their behaviours such as soil digging, vegetation destruction and habitat disturbance, lead to erosion, harm native ecosystems and threaten biodiversity.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated and effective management to protect Australia's landscapes and livelihoods from ongoing damage.

Habitat

Feral pigs have adapted to live in most areas across all states and territories in Australia. Due to their ineffective sweat glands, feral pigs have a low tolerance of hot and dry conditions. They need ready access to a water source to help maintain their body temperature. They favour wetlands and riverine areas that provide abundant food, water and shelter. They are most active in the cooler parts of the day.

Being highly adaptable, enables feral pig populations to establish in semi-arid rangelands to alpine environments. They live in groups close to water and use vegetation for shelter. Their inability to thermoregulate (they can't sweat) is the key limiting factor of their distribution within arid areas.



Department of
Primary Industries

Signs of feral pigs on your property

- Uprooting of soils
- Destruction of crops and pastures
- Fence damage and signs of mud and hair
- Tracks and scats (faeces)
- Wallows along dams or waterways
- Rub marks on trees and fence posts

Figure 2. Distribution of feral pigs across NSW

Agricultural impacts

Feral pigs are estimated to cost Australia's agricultural sector over \$156 million annually, with the true figure likely to be much higher. Their destructive behaviour impacts livestock through predation, reduces crop and horticultural yields, erodes soil and vegetation through digging, damages farm infrastructure such as fences and irrigation, spreads invasive weeds, and transmits diseases that affect humans, livestock, and plants.



Figure 2. Feral pig rooting on a farm

Environmental impacts

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Figure 3. Ideal habitat for feral pigs

Carbon emissions

When feral pigs uproot groundcover, they release carbon stored in the soil. One pig season (December to February) of uprooting can create more gas emissions than a million cars per year, contributing to climate change. According to some researchers, this activity contributes to global carbon emissions on a scale comparable to over a million cars annually.

Threats to native species

Feral pigs are recognised as a key threatening process under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) due to their extensive and destructive impact on Australia's ecosystems.

Their foraging behaviour severely damages native habitats, causing soil erosion, waterway degradation and the loss of vegetation essential for native species. By competing with wildlife for food resources, destroying breeding sites and spreading invasive weeds and diseases, feral pigs pose a significant threat to biodiversity and contribute to the decline of vulnerable plant and animal populations.

As opportunistic omnivores, feral pigs consume a wide variety of food, including small mammals, birds, reptiles, frogs, crayfish, eggs, earthworms and other invertebrates.

They also dig up large areas of soil to feed on all parts of plants, such as fruits, seeds, roots, tubers, bulbs and foliage. This disrupts plant biodiversity and intensifies competition with native species for critical food resources, further destabilising delicate ecosystems.

Within the Murray region, feral pigs' impact endangered species such as:

- Southern corroboree frogs,
- Booroolong frogs
- Southern-bell frogs.
- Murray River turtle
- Bush stone curlew

Disease transmission

Feral pigs are a carrier of human and animal diseases such as exotic leptospirosis, brucellosis (*Brucella suis*) and Japanese Encephalitis. Exotic diseases like African Swine Fever and foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), if introduced into Australia, could be transmitted by feral pigs, posing a serious risk to national biosecurity and trade. Feral pigs can also contribute to the spread of harmful plant pathogens such as *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, which can alter the composition of plant communities and cause dieback.

Struggling with feral pigs?

Contact your Local Land Services Biosecurity officer by calling 1300 795 299.

Get the latest advice at:
www.nsw.gov.au/feral-pig-video-guide