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Crews work to repair severe wild hog damage to green, hole at Sebastian Municipal Golf Course



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By Janet Begley

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SEBASTIAN — Call them wild boars, hogs or pigs. Officials at the Sebastian Municipal Golf Course call them destructive.

About two weeks ago, pigs started tearing up the turf at the 14th green and causing some lesser damage at the 11th hole. The pigs ripped up large chunks of the grass to get to earthworms that were underneath the root system, said golf course superintendent Sean Gillen.



Repair to the 14th green at Sebastian Municipal Airport, two weeks after hogs damaged the area.

“They’ve hit us hard on the greens,” said Gillen, of International Golf Management. “They rooted up about 300 square feet of turf, causing complete devastation.”

Wildlife experts say the hogs, which can weigh as much as 750 pounds, are increasingly running roughshod in rural areas, suburbs and even a few cities, digging up cemeteries, gardens and lawns.

Gillen said it’s the first time in 15 years he’s seen wild pigs cause this type of damage to a golf course.

“It’s an extremely uncommon occurrence,” said Gillen. “There’s always been evidence that they’re in other areas of the course, but they haven’t bothered the turf before.”

Pigs reportedly have damaged other golf courses on the Treasure Coast, but not to the extent of what happened at Sebastian.

It’s not the dollar amount of the damage, but the time needed to fix it that’s the most costly, Gillen said. His crews have put in more than 40 man-hours trying to restore the turf, placing pieces of the damaged grass back into the ground — similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

Gillen estimates the total cost of the repairs to be about \$1,000.

“We’re taking all kinds of measures to make sure that the grass takes,” said Gillen. “I’m out there every day with a hose, making sure that the area doesn’t dry out.”

Gillen estimates it will be five weeks before the grass is fully rooted again, providing there is no additional damage. He has been in touch with trappers to see if the pigs can be humanely trapped and released in the western part of the county.

That may be the only solution, said Ilka Daniel, director of animal protective services for the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County.

“Golf courses are rich in the things that pigs love to eat,” said Daniel. “The better job we do with the grass, the more we fertilize it and the better it grows, the more they want to eat it.”

Daniel said pigs burrow their snouts into the ground to get at the roots, causing significant damage to the turf.

“It almost looks like there has been an earthmoving machine brought in,” Daniel said, adding golf course workers should be prepared for the pigs to continue their turf-eating ways. “The sheer fact is that the number of pigs is increasing. They’re losing their predators and they reproduce so abundantly that they’re bound to keep causing problems.”

For Gillen, he’s just hoping the wild pigs will move off the course and stay away from his turf.

“As long as they’re not on the greens, they don’t bother me,” he said.

Wild hogs are going hog-wild along the Treasure Coast and throughout the country, more than doubling in population and range in the past 20 years, according to a 2009 report.

Two decades ago, 500,000 to 2 million wild pigs roamed the United States, Jack Mayer, a scientist with the U.S. Department of Energy’s Savannah River National Laboratory in Aiken, S.C., and a national expert on the problem, said in 2009. Now the population numbers 2 million to 6 million. In 1982, feral pigs were documented in 17 states. Today, they’re found in 44, with an estimated 1 million wild hogs in Florida.

First introduced to the continent by Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto in 1539, pigs commonly accompanied settlers to the New World, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Eurasian wild boar were introduced into the American wilderness beginning in about 1900. Today’s wild pig population is largely a combination of domestic pigs, Eurasian wild boar — or some blend of the two.

The pigs also are carriers for disease, and the pork industry has millions of dollars at stake if its livestock becomes infected. Seth Swafford, who leads the U.S. Agriculture Department’s feral pig tracking efforts, said in 2009 the animals mostly carry diseases that are transmitted to other pigs, including domestic animals.

Swafford said the feral swine can transmit some diseases to humans, as well. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission warns hog