



'SUPER PIGS' THREATENING TO INVADE THE U.S.



DAVID CARSON, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Two feral hogs are caught in a trap on a farm in rural Washington County, Mo., Jan. 27, 2019. Minnesota, North Dakota and Montana and other northern states are making preparations to stop a threatened invasion from Canada. Wild pigs already cause around \$2.5 billion in damage to U.S. crops every year, mostly in southern states like Texas. But the exploding population of feral swine on the prairies of western Canada is threatening spill south.

Population of hard-to-eradicate swine originating from Canada

STEVE KARNOWSKI
Associated Press

An exploding population of hard-to-eradicate "super pigs" in Canada is threatening to spill south of the border, and northern states like Montana, North Dakota and Minnesota are taking steps to stop the invasion.

In Canada, the wild pigs roaming Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba pose a new threat. They are often crossbreeds that combine the survival skills of wild Eurasian boar with the size and high fertility of domestic swine to create a "super pig" that's spreading out of control.

Ryan Brook, a professor at the University of Saskatchewan and one of Canada's leading authorities on the problem, calls feral swine, "the most invasive animal on the planet" and "an ecological train wreck."

Pigs are not native to North America. While they've roamed parts of the continent for centuries, Canada's problem dates back only to the 1980s when it encouraged farmers to raise wild boar, Brook said. The market collapsed after peaking in 2001 and some frustrated farmers simply

cut their fences, setting the animals free.

It turned out that the pigs were very good at surviving Canadian winters. Smart, adaptable and furry, they eat anything, including crops and wildlife. They tear up land when they root for bugs and crops. They can spread devastating diseases to hog farms like African swine fever. And they reproduce quickly. A sow can have six piglets in a litter and raise two litters in a year.

That means 65% or more of a wild pig population could be killed every year and it will still increase, Brook said. Hunting just makes the problem worse, he said. The success rate for hunters is only about 2% to 3% and several states have banned hunting because it makes the pigs more wary and nocturnal — tougher to track down and eradicate.

Wild pigs already cause around \$2.5 billion in damage to U.S. crops every year, mostly in southern states like Texas. And they can be aggressive toward humans. A woman in Texas was killed by wild pigs in 2019.

Eradication of wild pigs is no longer

possible in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Brook said. But the situation isn't hopeless everywhere and a few U.S. states have eliminated them. The key, he said, is having a detection system that finds them early and fast, and then responding quickly.

Brook and his colleagues have documented 62,000 wild pig sightings in Canada. Their aerial surveys have spotted them on both sides of the Canada-North Dakota border. They've also recorded a sighting in Manitoba within 18 miles of Minnesota.

"Nobody should be surprised when pigs start walking across that border if they haven't already," Brook said. "The question is: What will be done about it?"

Brook said Montana has been the most serious about keeping wild pigs out. It banned raising and transporting wild pigs within the state.

"The only path forward is you have to be really aggressive and you have to use all the tools in the toolbox," Brook said.

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Billings nonprofit offers shelter for sex trafficking survivors

PAUL HAMBY
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Some of the first survivors of human trafficking that Billings resident Britney Higgs ever spoke with were halfway around the world in Iraq. They were women seeking refuge from the wave of violence that fighters with the Islamic State brought to the region in 2015.

Higgs was then a videographer accompanying U.S. Special Forces in rescuing those escaping a genocidal campaign against Christian Yazidis living in Northern Iraq. As the only woman working with Special Forces at the time, Higgs was the only one able to speak with the women and girls rescued from massacres and sexual slavery.

"One thing I'll never forget was, so many

of them told me 'I wish I would have just died,'" said Higgs, who with her husband Sammy Higgs launched the HER Campaign, a non-profit in Montana dedicated to assisting survivors of sex trafficking.

The U.S. State Department estimates there are 28 million victims of human trafficking throughout the world at any given time. Trafficking humans for sex or labor transcends demographics, but the dynamic is consistent: A victim is forced into an act against their will, be it through deception, threats of violence or physical and emotional abuse. While the State Department also estimates that about two thirds of trafficking victims are forced laborers, gaps in data collected from

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LARRY MAYER, BILLINGS GAZETTE

HER Campaign nonprofit organizers Sammy and Britney Higgs are shown with staff member Selah Catt at the Marley House facility for human trafficking victims.

‘Wish’ doesn’t come true in theaters

JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Walt Disney Co.’s “Wish” had been expected to rule the Thanksgiving weekend box office, but moviegoers instead feasted on leftovers, as “The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes” led ticket sales for the second weekend, according to studio estimates Sunday. Neither of the weekend’s top new releases — “Wish” and Ridley Scott’s “Napoleon” — could keep up with Lionsgate’s “Hunger Games” prequel. After debuting the previous weekend with \$44.6 million, the return to Panem proved the top draw for holiday moviegoers, grossing \$28.8 million over the weekend and \$42 million over the five-day holiday frame.

In two weeks of release, “Songbirds and Snakes” has

grossed nearly \$100 million domestically and \$200 million globally.

The closer contest was for second place, where “Napoleon” narrowly outmaneuvered “Wish.” Scott’s epic outperformed expectations to take \$32.5 million over the five-day weekend and an estimated \$20.4 million Friday through Sunday. The film, starring Joaquin Phoenix as the French emperor and Vanessa Kirby as his wife Joséphine de Beauharnais, was also the top movie globally with \$78.8 million.

Reviews were mixed (61% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes) and ticket buyers were nonplussed (a “B-” CinemaScore), but “Napoleon” fared far better in theaters than its subject did at Waterloo.

“Napoleon,” like Martin Scorsese’s “Killers of the Flower Moon,” is a big-budget statement by Apple Stu-

dios of the streamer’s swelling Hollywood ambitions. With an estimated budget of \$200 million, “Napoleon” may still have a long road to reach profitability for Apple, which partnered with Sony to distribute “Napoleon” theatrically. But it’s an undeniably strong beginning for an adult-skewing 168-minute historical drama.

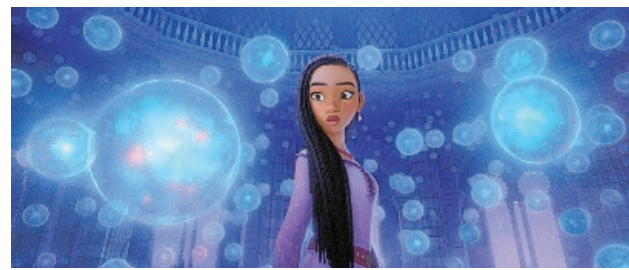
“Wish,” however, had been supposed to have a more starry-eyed start. Disney Animation releases like “Frozen II” (\$123.7 million over five days in 2019), “Ralph Breaks the Internet” (\$84.6 million in 2018) and “Coco” (\$71 million in 2017), have often owned Thanksgiving moviegoing.

But “Wish” wobbled, coming in with \$31.7 million over five days and \$19.5 million Friday through Sunday. It added \$17.3 million

internationally. It had been forecast to debut closer to \$50 million.

“Wish,” at least, is faring better than Disney’s Thanksgiving release last year: 2022’s “Strange World” bombed with a five-day \$18.9 million opening. But hopes were higher for “Wish,” co-written and co-directed by the “Frozen” team of Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee and featuring the voices of Ariana DeBose and Chris Pine. “Wish,” a fairy tale centered around a wished-upon star, is also a celebration of Disney, itself, timed to the studio’s 100th anniversary and rife with callbacks to Disney favorites.

Critics weren’t impressed, saying “Wish” felt more like a marketing than movie magic. So instead of righting an up-and-down year for Disney, “Wish” is, for now, adding to some of



DISNEY

Asha, voiced by Ariana DeBose, in a scene from the animated film “Wish.”

the studio’s recent headaches, including the underperforming “The Marvels.” The Marvel sequel has limped to \$76.9 million domestically and \$110.2 million overseas in three weeks.

“Wish” also faced direct competition for families in “Trolls Band Together.” The DreamWorks and Universal Pictures release opened a week prior, and took in \$17.5 million in its second frame (\$25.3 million over five days).

“‘Wish’ ran into a much more competitive market than what Disney might normally see in the Thanksgiving corridor,” said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for data firm Comscore. “We’re accustomed to seeing those Disney films at the top of the chart. They kind of had to split the audience with ‘Trolls.’”

Still, the storybook isn’t written yet on “Wish.” It could follow the lead of Pixar’s “Elemental,” which launched with a lukewarm \$29.6 million in June but found its legs, ultimately grossing nearly \$500 million worldwide.

Wild pigs

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That could include big ground traps with names like “BoarBuster” or net guns fired from helicopters. Some states and provinces embrace crowd-sourced “Squeal on Pigs” tracking programs. Scientists have also studied poisons such as sodium nitrite, but they risk harming other species.

Minnesota is among states trying to prevent the swine from taking hold. The state’s Department of Natural Resources is expected to release a report in February identifying gaps in its management plan and recommend new prevention steps. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is using aircraft and drones to beef up surveillance along

the northern border.

Minnesota was declared an eradicated state after USDA Wildlife Services shot and killed a group of pigs in 2016 that wandered off a farm and turned feral in the far northwest corner of the state — but not before they began to reproduce and root up a wildlife preserve. Gary Nohrenberg, the Minnesota director of Wildlife Services, said as far as he knows, no truly wild pigs have made their way to his state — yet.

Feral swine have been reported in at least 35 states, according to the USDA. The agency estimates the the swine population in those states totals around 6 million.

Since launching the National Feral Swine Management Program in 2014, the USDA has provided funding to 33 states, said Mike Mar-

low, an assistant program director. He said their goal is to eradicate wild pigs where populations are low or emerging, and to limit the damage where they’re already established such as Texas and southeastern states.

The program has had success in some states that had small populations like Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Washington, he said. The animals are spotted occasionally and quickly killed off in North Dakota.

“I think we’re making great strides toward success,” Marlow said. “But eradication is not in the near future.”

Follow AP news about invasive species at: <https://apnews.com/hub/invasive-species>.



ERIC GAY, ASSOCIATED PRESS

In this Feb. 18, 2009 file photo, feral pigs roam near a Mertzton, Texas ranch. Minnesota, North Dakota and Montana and other northern states are making preparations to stop a threatened invasion from Canada. Wild pigs already cause around \$2.5 billion in damage to U.S. crops every year, mostly in southern states like Texas. But the exploding population of feral swine on the prairies of western Canada is threatening spill south.

Shelter

From A1

survivors mars the accuracy of all reports on human trafficking. Federal law has only recognized human trafficking as a crime since the year 2000.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline, operated by the nonprofit Polaris Project, maintains an online database of the number of reports it’s received since it launched in 2007. From the roughly 1,500 tips the hotline received from Montana, which include phone calls, text messages or emails, the Human Trafficking Hotline identified 446 victims in the state.

Over the past decade, law enforcement in Montana has broken up suspected sex trafficking rings across the state. In one instance, a call for help from a survivor in Billings led to a 30-year prison sentence for a man who trafficked her in Montana, Washington and North Dakota. The shooting death of a young woman in 2019 led Billings police to a sex and drug trafficking racket in which woman and girls were brought to local motels and forced to engage in commercial sex. Five men were eventually charged and sentenced for operating the trafficking scheme.

During the most recent Montana State Legislature, lawmakers passed House Bill 112, which

brought the penalty for patronizing a prostitute from a misdemeanor to a felony. In July, 18 people in Gallatin County were charged with sex trafficking, per the new state law, following a sting operation in Bozeman. The change in state law was one part of the Montana Department of Justice’s campaign to bolster its fight against human trafficking.

The department has tracked a massive upswing in human trafficking cases investigated in Montana, with a more than 1,000% increase in annual cases since 2015. Speaking to the Gazette in 2022, advocates and law enforcement attributed the increase in cases to the increase in resources dedicated to prosecuting traffickers and assisting survivors.

In the nearly six years since Britney and Sammy Higgs launched the HER Campaign, both Governor’s Office and the Montana DOJ have become strategic partners for the non-profit, which has sheltered more than 200 sex trafficking survivors.

The seed that eventually blossomed into the HER Campaign began in 2016 during a family trip. While taking a break on a cross-state drive with her husband and children, Britney Higgs had a vision that she credits to her faith. Her experience in Iraq, combined with conversations she’d had with a friend regarding sex trafficking in India and Nepal, spurred her in-

terest in wanting to create a safe house for survivors in Montana. Without even knowing how to launch a safe house, she shared that vision with her husband, and the nonprofit was founded less than a year later.

In between Britney Higgs’s vision and the HER Campaign assisting its first survivor, the couple put themselves through a battery of trainings on hosting and assisting sex trafficking survivors. They made local contacts within law enforcement and social work agencies here in Billings, and received mentorship from a couple in Missoula who have offered shelter for survivors for years. For professional training, they attended courses in creating residential programs from the non-profit WellSpring Living, an Atlanta-based organization dedicated to combating sexual exploitation through education and mentorship.

Sammy and Britney Higgs acknowledge having no professional training in social work or therapy, and have partnered with Billings health organizations to fulfill those needs for sex trafficking survivors. What the couple does offer, Sammy Higgs said, is support and a model for a healthy relationship. The first woman the couple brought into their home stayed for about 10 months, and received assistance from them for a year-and-a-half.

“For us, our journey is to walk with them on their journey,” he said. “And it’s hard to get somewhere if you’ve never seen it before.”

About 85% of the women assisted by the HER Campaign have been through the foster care system, Britney Higgs said, and most of them are mothers.

“Many of them come from broken homes, and it’s never been modeled for them what safe relationships are,” she said. “Are Sammy and I perfect? No. But we do have tools in our tool belt to show them things like how to navigate conflict safely and healthily.”

Since the Higgs assisted their first survivor through the HER Campaign, their programs have expanded from their Billings home doubling as a safe house to campuses providing housing along with on-site therapy and job training. Like all forms of trauma, healing from sex trafficking is not linear, Britney Higgs said, with nearly all of the survivors she has worked with seeking help from the non-profit with also grappling with addiction and mental health problems.

“Somebody doesn’t get into a vulnerable position if they haven’t been through something traumatic,” she said. “You need to get rid of your fear of someone who is dealing with mental issues or addiction, even if their behavior is something you’d classify as

‘crazy’...Get rid of your fear, get curious about them and just listen.”

Treating a person carrying the trauma of sex trafficking, she said, requires a holistic approach to meet specific needs as they make their way from recovery and into economic independence. For the HER Campaign that means offering a safe house for survivors where they can eat and sleep for a few days, then assigning them a case manager to see if they’d like clinical treatment at the organization’s eight-week emergency shelter. After graduating from the emergency shelter, survivors have the option of entering programs for long-term residence, then transitional housing which can last over a year.

“If there’s just the long-term care,” Sammy Higgs said, “you’re asking someone whose brain is on fire and in a crisis to commit to a long term decision. That emergency shelter is there to help them stabilize so they can make the decision that’s best for themselves.”

A recent grant from the Gianforte Family Foundation allowed the HER Campaign to purchase the emergency shelter property the couple had been leasing for the past two years. On November 28, the non-profit will host a benefit at the Billings Depot. Those interested in attending can find more information at <https://hercampaign.org/>.

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