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OPENING ADDRESS:

THE IMPORTANCE OF WILDLIFE DAMAGE CONTROL IN TEXAS

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Let me first indicate that I have been interested in wildlife damage control programs for a good part of my life. My first experience, at the tender age of 6 years, was hard to accept when coyotes killed my 4-H pig. The importance of wildlife damage control has been clear to me since that time. Unfortunately, the importance of control is not often clear to those people who have not directly experienced wildlife damage.

On my first arrival in Texas in 1962, coyote populations were increasing in the state. At that time I was given the charge from the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station (TAES) of conducting sheep and goat research at one of the stations near the Ft. Hood military reservation. It became apparent that this location was really not the place to conduct sheep and goat research because of extensive predation. As a matter of fact, probably because of that experience more than anything else, TAES has conducted some research on a continuous basis to develop techniques to protect sheep and goats. The type of protection researched has ranged from electric fencing and other barriers to guard dogs, repellents and attractants.

Without question, part of the demise of the sheep and goat population in Texas is the result of the difficulty of wildlife damage control. During the last 20 years, we have seen the sheep and goat industry contract by approximately one third. Certainly, predation was a major element in that reduction. However, as you examine the records from those years, you will find that for those who did not suffer major predation, sheep and goat businesses have actually been among the most profitable of the ranching enterprises in the state. The difficulties associated with sheep and goat ranching, which include labor problems and other issues besides predation, have discouraged many ranchers and caused them to conclude during the next drought that they should try some other agricultural enterprise. There ARE some ranchers who have been diligent and persistent, working carefully with the Animal Damage Control program, with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (TAEX) to get some guidance with their wildlife damage problems in order to survive.

Certainly, the other area of wildlife damage control that takes Don Hawthorne and his personnel considerable time in addition to livestock protection is protection of other crops. With respect to coyote predation, these requests become more common around melon harvest time. Also of great importance is the protection of orchards, forests, and rangelands from other mammals such as ground squirrels and other rodents.

The protection of food and feed supplies is a major element within their activity and perhaps one which is of continual importance is the protection of residential and industrial facilities in urban areas. You might be interested to know that in 1972, a special item in the appropriations act directed the Texas Rodent and Predatory Animal Control Service to extend their activities to rat control in major metropolitan areas. This program has expanded greatly because of the need experienced by an increased clientele and the assistance they require, and must now accommodate the citizens of large urban and suburban areas for a variety of wildlife damage control. As a matter of fact, as more urbanites move into the Edwards Plateau area, they have become interested in predation by coyotes.

The Texas Rodent and Predatory Animal Control Service has great leadership in this state, but without question, more is expected of them every day. I believe that you, as specialists in wildlife damage control, have some tremendous challenges ahead of you, many of which you will be addressing at this conference. There is, even in Texas and even here in the sheep and goat raising part of the state, an increased tenor among people who do not understand livestock programs. They voice the right to see all of God's creatures as they drive through the land and that wildlife be made available to them. Certainly, that philosophy should be taken seriously.

Without question, control measures will be more closely scrutinized and those who do not adhere to the laws or methods of applying the present and future control techniques we might have available to us will be vigorously prosecuted. That is why I firmly believe that those of you who are specialists in wildlife damage control and those in the extension services in the various states must take seriously educational programs to give producers all the information which we have concerning these subjects.

We must maintain a high credibility with those who have a different viewpoint from that which producers of livestock have as they try to make some economic returns from their operations. We must be aware of their thoughts and their concerns and we must be sure that we do our business correctly.

I am confident of this because we have had an opportunity to visit with a new breed of legislators in our state and the concerns they have about wildlife damage control programs. Certainly they view it somewhat differently as we talk about protecting homes in urban areas with rodent control. They also view it differently in the eastern part of the state with beaver damage to dams, streams, and forests.

However, there is a very definite change in the tenor and attitude of people in this state. It is considered to be a rural state and we have much space between our cities. Some would say that such land is not worth a whole lot but that situation may not be so if we have an effective wildlife damage control program. We still have much territory in this state which is suitable for production of sheep and goats and other livestock, but without effective programs we will find added pressures on producers in our state and they simply won't be able to make it.

On behalf of the citizens of San Antonio, and on behalf of the Texas A&M University System, I welcome you here and appreciate your attendance at this conference.