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### Game Ranching: Boon or Bane?

Bruce Morrison

*Nebraska Game and Parks Commission*

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## **Special Session Four.**

### ***Game Ranching: Boon or Bane?***

*Chair*

**Bruce Morrison**

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission  
Lincoln

*Co-chair*

**Ronald Regan**

Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department  
Waterbury

## **Opening Remarks**

**Bruce Morrison**

*Nebraska Game and Parks Commission  
Lincoln*

The title of today's session is *Game Ranching: Boon or Bane?* What do we mean by game ranching? For today's discussions, we will look at the raising of traditional wildlife species, both native and exotic, behind high-wire fences for economic return. Many years ago, this was considered a Texas problem and most state wildlife agencies did not pay much attention to the growing trend of fencing large acreages to hold wildlife captive. It was contrary to the traditional view of game management and many thought that it was just a passing fad. Today, there are thousands of captive wildlife operations with tens of thousands of wild animals held captive behind high-wire fencing. What began as a hobby by a few landowners has grown into a multi-million dollar industry that, at times, has negative impacts on native wildlife management. The introduction of new, exotic species into native habitat, the fencing of migration corridors and the introduction of new or previously controlled diseases present management challenges to wildlife biologists that were not there in the past. The economic

downturn experienced by the traditional livestock industry at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has driven more and more landowners to investigate and invest in nontraditional ranching practices. Being more comfortable with state agriculture agencies, these operators have led the drive to have the captive wildlife industry regulated by agriculture departments rather than the wildlife agency. This new use of wildlife is viewed by some as the right of private landowners and a method to save the family farm or ranch. Others view it as a way to make more money from the land, rather than by raising crops or traditional livestock. Still, others view it as a direct challenge to the North American model of wildlife management and a return to the days of market hunting, behind high-wire this time. Instances of illegal transfer of animals from one state to another, the capture and holding of the state's native wildlife and genetic manipulation to produce trophy animals by a few have given a bad reputation to the industry in the eyes of many. The unwillingness of state wildlife agencies to work with captive producers and state agricultural agencies has also given our profession a tarnished image in the eyes of many producers and their organizations. Today, we will look at this industry from many views, including the state, the producer and the federal government's. We will see how this industry has spread and what impacts it may have on wildlife management in North America. After today's session, I hope that we, as wildlife management professionals, can work with each other, with captive wildlife producers, with the sporting public and with agriculture agencies, to work through our differences to develop regulations to control the threats of this industry to native species, while at the same time acknowledging that we can agree to disagree on some of the concerns voiced. Only when we reach the point where we can work with each other, not against each other, can the concerns of each interest group be addressed in a manner that benefits wildlife resources and the citizens of our country that have charged us with managing that resource.