

Tree Farm Security



Texas Game Warden Bill Zappe, Chief Deputy Sheriff Clint Sturrock, Texas A & M Forest Service Law Enforcement Chief Les Rodgers, and Texas A & M Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer David Zeigler

At the September 15, 2012, general meeting of the Tyler County Forest Landowner Association in Woodville, Texas, Tyler County Chief Deputy Sheriff Clint Sturrock, Texas Parks & Wildlife Game Warden Bill Zappe, Texas A & M Forest Service Law Enforcement Chief Les Rodgers and Texas A & M Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer David Zeigler informed approximately thirty-five attendees about tree farm security issues and how to prevent and/or respond to them.

Speakers from all three organizations emphasized that they support each other and that while any of the three offices will respond, it is generally advisable to call the sheriff's office for any immediate situation.

To reduce vulnerability to tree farm trespassing, theft and damage, landowners should

- Be willing to prosecute trespassers, as this is a precursor to other violations.
- Mark property lines clearly.
- Engrave ownership identification inside items such as wildlife feeders.
- Install game cameras.
- Maintain adequate fire lanes.

For absentee landowners, it may be advisable to arrange for a neighbor or consultant to monitor your tree farm -- or to establish a hunting lease so that the hunters can monitor the farm.

Tyler County Chief Deputy Clint Sturrock stated that his office will handle trespassing and illegal criminal acts. This includes theft, damage to property and acts of reckless destruction such as four-wheelers driving over seedlings. The highest volume of reported burglaries is Labor Day Weekend – when many landowners who live outside the county arrive to discover damage and/or theft on their tree farm. Chief Deputy Sturrock also noted that theft and damage has decreased as the presence of game cameras has increased. Since trespassers may simply steal a camera, it is advisable to camouflage it well. Another approach is to mount a low-cost, decoy camera in a very visible location with another camera well camouflaged and focused on the decoy. There is a new game camera available which does not generate a flash or sound.

Texas Game Warden Bill Zappe, who has served eight years as one of Tyler County's two Game Wardens, stated that his biggest challenge is landowners who will not press formal charges after he arrives. The landowner must share responsibility in managing trespassing by being willing to press charges and marking property lines with either a maintained fence and/or purple paint. Purple paint must be applied every 100 feet or less along the property lines of a forest, or every 1000 feet or less along the property lines of a pasture. When purchasing purple paint, be sure it is classified as "boundary line purple" as this is more defensible in court, if needed. The paint must be applied in stripes at least 8 inches long and 1 inch wide. If there are no fence posts or trees at the required intervals, t-posts may be installed and the paint applied to them.

Noting the recent incidence of illegal plants in the county, Game Warden Zappe cautioned landowners to back out of the area if he or she locates a questionable plot. Since the plot may be booby trapped, it is advisable to report the situation and allow law enforcement officers to handle the situation professionally.

Game Warden Zappe shared that law enforcement officers have retrieved items, such as wildlife feeders, that they know are stolen; however, unless the property owner had the foresight to engrave his name or other identification information inside the item, the officers cannot contact the owner.

If scheduling requires both of Tyler County's game wardens to be unavailable, a game warden from a neighboring county will be made available. The county is covered twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Texas A. & M. Forest Service Chief Law Officer Les Rodgers is allocated a staff of nine, including himself, for the entire state. His office focuses on arson and timber theft. Chief Rodgers emphasized the importance of processing trespassing incidents. If trespassing is enforced, arson and timber theft decrease. He urged individuals to report sightings of arson and timber theft incidents and to obtain the license plates and description of suspicious vehicles.

Texas A. & M. Forest Service Law Officer David Zeigler is stationed in the Kirbyville office and is very familiar with East Texas. He stated that it is difficult to prosecute arson

cases in East Texas and lamented that his office has received only one call in response to the offers for rewards for information. They need for us to be observant and to report what we see. Firebreaks on the property boundaries and game cameras at entrances help reduce incidents of arson and timber theft.

Officer Zeigler explained how timber theft can result from oral or badly written logging contracts. Landowners should ensure that contracts are thorough and the landowner should be present to monitor harvesting operations. Having property lines clearly marked helps reduce incidents of encroachment during a neighbor's harvest.

Individuals who share ownership of undivided land, usually via inheritance, should be aware that any one of the individuals can sell all the timber. The seller is supposed to put the money in escrow and then divide it with the other owners. However, this is a civil, not a legal, crime and law enforcement officers cannot assist.

On related wildlife topics

While some landowners expressed frustration with stray dogs, Game Warden Zappe stated that there are no dog leash laws in Tyler County and he emphasized that it is illegal to shoot a dog on your property unless it is threatening a person or livestock; deer are not livestock.

The presence of large cats has been confirmed in Tyler County. Cats will seldom eat a whole deer in one night. Instead they will bury the remainder of a kill and come back later to eat it. Be very cautious if you encounter a kill site.

Tyler County no longer provides an adequate habitat for bears and no sightings have been confirmed.