

Rancher Kills 39 Antelope

By Jeff Jones Copyright © 2008 Albuquerque Journal; Journal Staff Writer A northern New Mexico rancher using a shotgun and an all-terrain vehicle has chased down and shot dozens of antelope feeding in his wheat field, according to the state Game and Fish Department. The agency says Cimarron-area rancher Neal Trujillo was "less than cooperative" about finding another solution last month before he began shooting the animals, which is legal for landowners under a controversial state law. Game and Fish said at least 39 antelope have been killed at the ranch, not including any that might have run off and weren't located by game officers. Some of the 39 were maimed but not killed by the shotgun blasts and had to be put out of their misery by the officers. "It's a hard one to swallow," Lief Ahlm, chief of the agency's northeast-area office, said Monday. Trujillo, meanwhile, said that he tried repeatedly to work with Game and Fish. But he said he won't abide by one of their conditions for reinforcing a fence to help keep out the antelope, which are also known as pronghorns. "I've called the game department I don't know how many times trying to work this out," he said in a telephone interview Monday. "I didn't just go out and start shooting antelope." Trujillo added: "I'm sure there are a lot of bleeding hearts out there that don't want the antelope shot. But every time an antelope takes a bite out of my field, he's taking money out of my pocket." The antelope carcass count from Trujillo's property is sure to reignite the debate over a controversial 1997 law that allows New Mexico farmers and ranchers to immediately kill game that threatens their crops. "This law needs to be overturned," said New Mexico Wildlife Federation Director Jeremy Vesbach, adding that his organization will push for that during next year's legislative session. A shotgun, which fires a group of small pellets rather than a single, larger-caliber bullet, is not meant for big-game hunting— and Vesbach condemned the shotgun killings. "This was absolutely an inhumane act," he said. Trujillo said, "I'm not a very good shot with a rifle." Ahlm said Trujillo had about 200 antelope in his Colfax County winter-wheat field, and an agency report shows that officers in late February and early March hazed the speedy animals off the property with ATVs and other vehicles. Antelope usually go under barbed-wire fences rather than over them. And Ahlm said Game and Fish offered to give Trujillo the materials— and some of the labor— needed to reinforce his fence to keep the animals out on the condition that Trujillo sign a contract agreeing to maintain the fence at his expense. Trujillo declined the contract deal. Game and Fish fixed one portion of the fence anyway, but Ahlm said about 50 antelope continued to get into the wheat field. "We offered him the interventions at our disposal," Ahlm said of Trujillo. But "I'd look at him as being certainly less than cooperative." The Game and Fish report said Trujillo on March 6 reported he'd shot some antelope. The killings continued later into March, the report said, adding that Trujillo's adult son, Neal Trujillo Jr., also reported killing some of them. The last reported shootings took place March 24, when officers found 18 dead antelope. That morning, before the shootings were reported, an officer had tried to haze the antelope off the wheat with noise-making devices. On that day, "Trujillo says he has (Game and Fish's) 'attention now ... I got tired of shooting antelope,'" the report said. Trujillo said Monday that Game and Fish made only a "halfhearted effort" at pushing the antelope away from his property. He said he didn't want to sign the fencing contract because elk, which also come onto the land, tear up the fencing. "Why would I want to maintain something that I know is going to be torn up all the time?" he asked, adding that Game and Fish would be "more than welcome" to reinforce and maintain the fence on its own. Trujillo said that although most of the animals are now gone, he

believes the problem will recur this fall when his next crop of winter wheat greens up while the rest of the landscape turns brown. When that happens, "I've got the green spot," he said. The 1997 law that allows ranchers to shoot crop-threatening game is known as the Jennings Law. It is named after its sponsor, Sen. Tim Jennings, D-Roswell, who is now the Senate president pro tem. The law allows the no-strings-attached killing of wildlife that presents an "immediate threat" to life or property, specifying only that the shootings be reported within 24 hours. After a 2003 incident in which another rancher killed 19 elk that he said were causing heavy crop damage, some lawmakers and Gov. Bill Richardson sought to change the law. Jennings said in a telephone interview Monday that while he's willing to take another look at the law, he believes Game and Fish needs to do a better job of handling ranchers' crop-damage complaints. Jennings said, "I don't condone any indiscriminate killing of animals." But he added the 200 antelope on Trujillo's ranch were eating the equivalent of what 40 cows would eat. "His wheat is his livelihood— it's just like money in the bank," Jennings said. "Could there be some changes? Yes, there could," Jennings said of the law. "But there has to be some changes that go both ways."