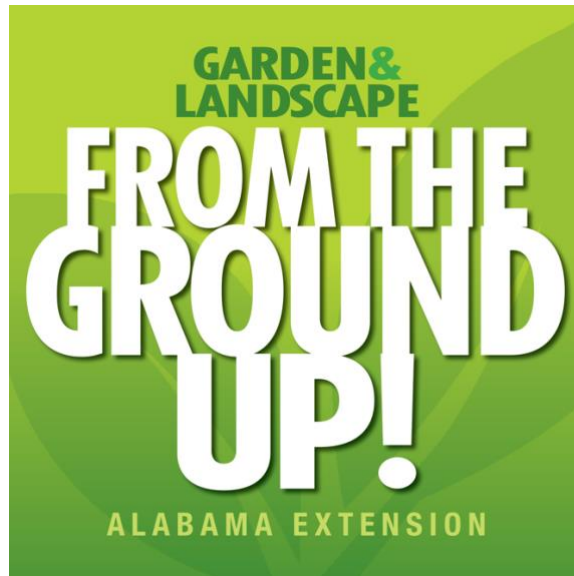




Season 3 Episode 3—Managing Wildlife Damage

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Narrator

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Horticulture team, educating you about home, landscapes, gardens, and home pests.

Brian Brown

All right. Thanks for joining us today. We have Norm Haley. And I'm going to let him introduce because he's got a pretty long title right.

Norm Haley

I sure do, Brian. Yes, I'm Norm Haley. I'm the Forestry, Wildlife and Natural Resources Management Extension Agent for northeast Alabama.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So, thanks for joining us today. One of the topics that we get a ton of questions about is wildlife damage. And so he's kind of the expert on that. And I've done a lot of programs with him in the past. And so he's going to tell you a little bit about, you know, what shows up in our yards. How do we manage them? You know, I get a lot of calls about armadillos. That's a really bad one. So, you know, just squirrels in the attic. Bats. I mean, there's all kinds of things that annoy us and get and get to it. So, what are some methods that we can do to help control that? Yeah, I get.

Norm Haley

A lot of wildlife damage calls to Brian, and whether it's the home grounds team or the commercial horticulture or agronomic agent, livestock and forages, wildlife can cause damage in all types of realms. You know, in the home ground and the garden aspect, you know, it could be anything from just like what you mentioned, a squirrel in the attic, bats in the shed. I had that call last week, and certainly armadillos, especially this time of year as we're speaking in August and Alabama, that armadillo damage becomes a bit of an uptick in the home landscape. So, when we talk about wildlife damage in general, very often clients call and they have some sort of some sort of pest damage, and they very often don't exactly have it pinned down in terms of what it might be. And armadillo is a good example of that one. As they dig in the turf, there's lots of other animals that dig in the turf. So, a key component to wildlife damage management is identifying the pests or the pest, singular or pest with an S that you're dealing with because it could oftentimes be more than one pest at one time causing you trouble.

Brian Brown

You know, I probably get more armadillo calls than anything. That seems to be the prevalent thing in Alabama, no matter what part of Alabama you're in. But especially here in North Alabama, we just get tons of those, moles and voles, those kind of things. And really, skunks, I've had skunks in my own yard before. So that's something we always have to watch out for.

Norm Haley

Yeah. With all those species you just listed, you know, as they dig in the turf layer, they're insectivores and they're, they're primarily after the grubs and insects underneath that sod layer in the mulch or like, you know, landscaping, whatever, whatever it might be. And this time of year, when things get droughty and food resources become a bit more slim, and you've got that nice irrigated lawn, well fertilized and good soil in there, you're growing insects the same way you are pretty turf. So here, come here come the the wildlife pest coming to get to get a meal in the front yard or out the back door.

Brian Brown

Is there a way to determine just from the, the size of the hole or, or whatever it may be, the size of the mound that's being made, one species or one, one animal from the other?

Norm Haley

The easiest ones to tease apart are the mole damage versus armadillo damage. Of course, moles will be subterranean. Primarily, you're going to see some tunnels just below the sod layer there, and possibly some eruptions where they come out of the yard and left kind of that little volcano of soil, if you will, where armadillo are a lot more haphazard. Just kind of, I say kind of pinball or ping pong and back and forth throughout the yard and just sort of haphazardly digging real rough and shallow little holes as they just pick and poke, looking for insects, that can come underneath their nose. Sometimes when we have raccoon or skunk or possum damage, those are also equipped to dig and can show extremely similar symptoms as far as armadillo damage is concerned.

And that's one of the things that I recommend. It's, it's hard to beat our very own eyes, you know, shine in the yard, maybe just a few hours after a sunset or there, right at sunset. A lot of times you can get a visual on the animals with the spotlight and trail cameras go a long ways nowadays too. They're way more affordable than they used to be, where they're up there working all night long while you're getting, you're getting some shut eye, right? So, you don't have to be out there shining in the yard at the wee hours of the night. So that's another good way to go about getting a good identification on the pest that you're having trouble with.

Brian Brown

So, they're, they're really after the insects, right?

Norm Haley

That's right.

Brian Brown

What's the best method of control? So, I know you can trapping and all kinds of things like that. You can shoot them if you're in the proper area. You don't want to shoot them if you're in town. But you know, out in the country, like where I live, you know, we could we could shoot them or dispose of them. I guess that's the proper term, right?

Norm Haley

Dispatch.

Brian Brown

Dispatching Yeah. Dispatching. But yeah, that's, that's, that's something that that is an option.

Norm Haley

It is. So, we've got, you know, when clients call, we kind of unroll the carpet in terms of giving them the options that they can, you know, take the path towards. So so trapping is a is a very effective option for armadillo. It does take time and it does take effort and it does take some specialized equipment. We do need to make sure that we've got those good sturdy cage traps available. And I do say sturdy -- smaller and more economical cage traps do not do a good job of holding an armadillo or catching really more than one before they're too bent up and almost disposable at that point. So, you do want to invest in a good cage trap for that. We don't bait those traps. We actually funnel the armadillos into those traps. They don't come to a bait very well that's been studied at the research level. And there's been no improvements over bait versus non baited trap sites.

Very often after I go through the trapping scenarios and explain folks how to go about that, they choose this second option that that I, that I often provide, which is just the broad spectrum insecticide granule that you can broadcast throughout the lawn. Those provide anywhere from 2 to 6 months of control based on the product that you buy. Those are primarily just, you know, applied with your basic garden or lawn spreader, which a lot of folks have available already. And you get a whole lot of control with fairly low input, pretty fast and effective.

That way, when you get rid of the food resource with those insect granules, the moles and the raccoons and armadillos and whatever is digging in that turf layer will have to go on and find to find their forage somewhere else.

And then the third, like we've led on to this at this point of the conversation, is you can you can shoot them in areas where you're allowed to discharge a firearm. That is something that I've employed myself, again, living in a more rural area. I shine the yard right there after sunset, and if they're there, you know they'll get a well-placed .22 and moved on. And if they're not, I'll go to bed and we'll try it again the next night. And I like to share, folks with the experience that I've had, where generally in a season I might kill 2 or 3, and then I might go a year or two without having any trouble, and then a year or 2 or 3 comes back around. You might have to be scouting for armadillo again.

Brian Brown

Yeah. And you, I think you mentioned before in one of your programs that I've been a part of and attended. You said that once you trap something, you really have to dispatch it because of rabies, right?

Norm Haley

We have regulation in the state of Alabama. Folks like the idea of a cage trap because you have the animal live and you can do it, you know, quote unquote. I'm saying air quotes here. You know, "a favor" by taking it on down the road and releasing it. Legally, we are not allowed to relocate animals across the county line or beyond a major river drainage, which doesn't have to go very far in Alabama to check one of those, one of those two boxes. So, I do stress to folks that, you know, these are a pest. We do have, you know, high populations of many of these animals that we'll talk about today. And it's a good idea to have a plan for euthanization (*sic*).

You know, as we move animals into a new area, you can imagine as yourself just being dumped out of a car and told good luck. It's just not very different for those animals. They run into stresses very often. They'll get hit on the road as they try to make their way back home. You have the chances to move diseases and viral issues to other pests or other populations that would otherwise be healthy, and you run the risk of being bitten as well.

Brian Brown

Right.

Norm Hayley

And animals are pretty territorial. They don't take very kindly to a new-- So it's a it's a stressful situation to relocate an animal. It's not it's not the favor we think that we're giving them.

Brian Brown

All right. So what about things in the garden? There's a lot of things that like love to peruse the garden and eat eat our garden vegetables. And I had some strawberries I planted back in the fall. I didn't get one single strawberry this year because the squirrels ate them. And I was not very happy, to say the least. So, you know, gardens, they, they attract a lot of things. What do you do in that situation?

Norm Haley

We grow a lot of good stuff in the garden and the wildlife know that as well. And they're on their way. You mentioned squirrel right off the bat. When I do get a squirrel phone call, I do kind of slink my head. They are the acrobats of the of the wildlife. I mean, they are they are so persistent and so capable of getting in so many different situations and causing trouble, whether it's the pecan tree or just the mess on the back deck from shelling hickories or pine cones and the garden itself. Squirrels are tough. That's just all there is to it. They can come in from the air, they can dig under things. They're small as a rodent, you know, doesn't take much for them to squeeze through some of our exclusion, you know, fences and things like that. Squirrels are just downright tough.

Brian Brown

And and they're smart, too.

Norm Haley

And they're smart and they're persistent. And that's one that's one overarching theme of wildlife damage. You'll never respect an animal more than when you try to outsmart it. You're going to learn a lot about and have a lot more, you know, credit given to that animal after you've you tried to manage it because these animals, it is their livelihood, right. And they've got a lot more time on their hands than you and I do. I make that kind of as a joke. But, you know, they're out there day in and day out, and they're going to figure out that puzzle that you've put in place, or at least, you know sure enough, try. They'll test every, every way they can.

But in the garden, it's very, very hard to beat exclusion. Even a short exclusion fence really deters a lot of our trouble animals between rabbits, especially groundhogs as well. Anything that would simply try to walk into the garden and take a take an easy meal. And when I say a small exclusion fence, something you know, between knee to waist high and the really important thing that adds a lot of value, value to a fence in the garden is is really what we would call an apron, to where as that fence comes down at ground level, you can turn it at 90 degrees away from the garden with fencing at the ground level to where an animal that approaches that fence and attempts to dig under, like many will do, they run into a barrier to where they just can't tunnel under and get into the garden that way. And that really is an investment that lasts a long time and provides a lot of value for a wildlife damage control.

Of course, there's plenty of animals that will crawl over a fence as well. And you know, when you talk about squirrels, you can also think about birds too. You can get very extravagant with netting. You know, our commercial horticulture agents and the fruit producers get very technical. There's lots of options out there as far as netting and exclusion that way to, to where, you know, as much as you want to spend, as much time as you want to put into it, you can you can exclude from, from above as well.

Brian Brown

Yeah. There's- I actually just had the question just before we, we came here to record this podcast. Somebody was wanting to know what's eating my vegetables? They, they had eaten a smaller lower area. And I told them that, you know, usually you got to think about how tall that animal is, like a rabbit, you know, they're going to

eat, if it's a taller plant, they're going to eat like the bottom, maybe ten inches or so, something like that. Is that a good way to tell? I mean, there's a lot of things that eat your vegetable garden, but is there something characteristic that you can look for to help identify what exactly you're dealing with?

Norm Haley

Yeah, absolutely. When it comes to wildlife damage, you kind of have to be a detective and use some of the clues that were left behind. You know, I'll very often show in my presentations of those nicely clipped off stems and leaves from, from a rabbit, you know, with, with rodent teeth, they will generally make a very nice clean, crisp cut. To where the, the, the converse of that would be, you know, whitetail deer damage where they have that just that hard upper palate and they just kind of mash and gnarl at those more a more, you know, I won't say woody stems in the garden situation, but more, more fibrous type stems, you'll see more of a gnarling or a mashing off that way that rodents don't, don't provide that.

And of course, just like you say, height is another consideration for sure. And you can also you can also look at kind of the pattern of, of damage on whether that it's that fruit or that vegetable. Again, the leaf will generally be gone with white tailed deer damage where a rabbit might, you know, just chew on a margin of a leaf and kind of leave some cuttings that way too.

And I do like to put up a picture of a of some peach damage. One of these peaches has a really smoothed out kind of a concave sort of a damage. And the other one is, is pretty sharp and jagged and kind of, you know, you can tell where it was really pecked out by a bird, where that other damage was snail damage. Yeah. So, if you're trying to control, you know, birds in the peaches and you've actually got a snail problem, you're probably not going to make it very far. So yeah, some of the damage left behind is very, is very important to kind of kind of piece together and clue out what you've got as well.

Brian Brown

Yeah, and I guess you could also look for the, their scat. Right. Which if you don't know what scat is, that's, that's animal poop.

Norm Haley

That's right.

Brian Brown

So, you can you can kind of identify that. If you don't know what that normally looks like, you know, just look it up online and, you know, or you can just send us a picture as well. So you can always contact us Extension agents and say, "hey, what's, what's this poop?"

Norm Haley

Yeah. Yeah. That that "who dung it" if you will. (both laugh) And that's one thing you know, with, with the rabbits around the garden, you know, they've got a pretty short digestive system. So, it's going -- if they spend much time at all, you're probably going to find those really small, round rabbit droppings. White tailed deer are

pretty indicative of what we call, you know, that Milk Duds shape, if you will. So, there are some clues and some considerations we make, and we do absolutely get those pictures sent and we help to ID that way. Absolutely.

Brian Brown

So, deer is probably one of the biggest problems that I get calls on other than armadillos. And it is a huge problem because deer, they get hungry and they will eat just about anything in what I've seen. So, what are some control measures for deer in particular?

Norm Haley

Yeah, we talk about deer preferences and planning. You know, some options in the landscape that maybe they don't prefer. But like you say in high populations or in high times of stress, which again, August is a high time for wildlife nutritional stress, they're going to eat some things they otherwise wouldn't prefer. I mean, we've even seen, you know, browsing on, on leyland cypress and pines and things like that. And they're having a hard time if they're doing that. But they will, you know, they're going to do what they need to do to survive.

Going back to exclusion again, an eight-foot-tall fence will keep a deer out. Yeah, that that really is the tried-and-true method for deer. We do have some more, you know, less costly or, I guess also potentially less unsightly, you know, things as far as an eight-foot-tall fence. You can do temporary perimeter fencing with or, I'm sorry, a temporary poly tape fencing. You know, a temporary electric fence. There's solar chargers that are, you know, capable of running for weeks on end with a deep cycle battery. And if you put those fences up early, they don't have to be tall. They can just be waist high. And those deer will, they can be acclimated to the fence by actually kind of tricking them and teasing them to learn what it is with what we call the peanut butter method. You take a little smear of peanut butter, put it on a piece of foil and wrap it around that hot wire fence. As they lick that, they'll learn that we need to stay away from this fence before the good, you know, you know, beans and corn come up behind it. So that that is a method. Put that fence up early and keep it hot.

In the lawn and landscape side of things, too, I feel like a really underutilized technique is the motion activated sprinklers that we hear about.

Brian Brown

Oh, okay, yeah.

Norm Haley

And those work well in the garden too, for all types of pests. There's not there's not very many wildlife out there that appreciate a blast of water in the face and the noise that's associated with those sprinklers as they as they turn on. And you can also pretty easily move those around.

And that's something, too, wildlife do become acclimated to things like that. The visual deterrents, the flashy tapes and the and the decoys and scarecrows and even the motion activated sprinklers. But for a fairly small fee, I think between \$50 and \$75 roughly, you can get a little solar powered, motion activated sprinkler that really keeps wildlife on on their toes and keeps them, keeps them out of where you don't need them.

Brian Brown

Yeah, yeah, I've seen those advertised before, haven't really used them before, but we've tried just about everything to keep them out this year. Like my dad for example, he planted gourds and we don't have a single gourd left now. I mean, the deer eat every single one of them and we just we've got to start doing something to to keep them at bay or we're not going to have any martins [birds].

Norm Haley

You get you some camouflage in. Yeah. And some time in the deer stand maybe.

Brian Brown

Yeah. You know, fortunately that was right beside a shooting house that we have, so.

Norm Haley

Well, there you go

Brian Brown

It's convenient. So just the wrong time of year. So. Yes. But, but yeah, you know, I would say, probably behind armadillos, deer are probably the number one call I get. And I'm sure you as well, getting that as well. So.

Norm Haley

And I do like to share, you know a slide or a photo that I've got in my PowerPoints of what we call integrated pest management. That's where using more than one technique at one time. And the more that you can employ, the more effective you're going to be towards reducing the wildlife damage to whatever level is acceptable to you. In terms of deer, I've got a photo of a eight-foot-tall electric fence with a scarecrow behind it, rags hanging from the fence, and the scarecrow is holding a shotgun. And that's a whole lot of visual deterrent, you know, physical deterrence and exclusion, all, you know, all going on at one time because they can be...again, these wildlife can be persistent. And you really got to kind of switch things up and keep it up on you. That's, that's an extreme example. But that was a that was a fellow that was having a hard time with some deer damage.

Brian Brown

Obviously. Yeah. So, what about some of the myths out there? So, I've heard things like, like human hair, you know, people put human hair, they'll go to their local barber shop and 'Hey, can I have some hair to put my garden?'

Norm Haley

Sure.

Brian Brown

I'm. I'm thinking that's a myth. What do you what say you?

Norm Haley

Well, there's all types of olfactory deterrents, right? Whether there are things that you can buy on the shelf, the human hair, like you mentioned, even folks I've heard, you know, saving their urine, you know, for garden season. That's a thing that happens.

Brian Brown

Wow.

Norm Haley

Things like even, you know, the, the Irish spring soap that's, you know, drilled and hung off of areas within, within the garden or landscaping, too. I would argue that all of those have at least some deterrent value if, if anything, for a very short amount of time. With a lot of the olfactory deterrents, they just have to be reapplied and they really have to keep up, to be, you know, to be enough to keep persistent and hungry and sometimes starving....

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Norm Haley

...to be honest, wildlife out of a garden. There are folks that have very good success with those situations, because maybe the neighbor has a garden that doesn't have that on there. So they, you know, go to the next quickie stop down the road or they've got a lower density population. If you've got a really high deer density, and they're again starving, they'll they'll tolerate the Irish Spring and hair and some of those deterrents.

Brian Brown

So something that's really come up recently, especially here in North Alabama, and I know in your area of northeast Alabama, we're seeing a lot more reports of black bears.

Norm Haley

That's right.

Brian Brown

And I don't know that they've become overly nuisance animals like they are up in, you know, in the Gatlinburg area and in the Smoky Mountain area. But we are seeing more of them. And there was actually one down the road killed on I-22 in Alabama about 3 or 4 weeks ago near Winfield. And so that's that's pretty far from where we normally see them, starting to see them, up in northeast album. So what's going on with the black bear situation?

Norm Haley

Yeah, that's right. They're going to be kind of that newcomer towards this wildlife damage conversation. And I heard one that had popped up in Montgomery I think last month as well. So they're getting, well, much more well distributed throughout the state. Yeah. We're not at the point of nuisance like what you'd see in the Smoky Mountains and Gatlinburg type areas.

But you know, if, you know, population goes unmanaged, you know, for long enough, you'll have numbers to where more and more nuisance. And I shouldn't say unmanaged, but, you know, without a lot of take as far as a hunting season or a reason for human fear, you'll see them encroaching more and more into the backyards and the landscapes and gardens like what we've been talking about. And we've had those, we've had those calls. They love a bird feeder. They will clear out some bird seed, believe it or not, and they'll be picking around, of course, the trash and garbage that's maybe not secured outside.

But even more importantly, things like even an empty food bowl for a pet left on the back deck. They will come by to lick the residue out of that. The same way that, you know raccoon and possum will as well. Skunks, for that matter. And, you know, greasy grills and barbecues and things like that. So it's it's time for us in Alabama to think about being a bit more bear wise, for sure.

And to that tune, we have just put up a publication on aces.edu of "Living With Black Bears", that really outlines a lot of the considerations towards being a bit more, again, bear wise, and some things that we can do to reduce those damage calls or that that wildlife conflict because it's a, it's coming sooner, sooner than what we all think. The populations are doing well. They found that these black bears are having four cubs per litter doing really well as far as reproduction. We've got great habitat for them. So, we we don't see them on the decline by any means in north Alabama. Those populations are growing.

Brian Brown

Wow. That's pretty amazing that, you know, we're just not used to seeing them in this part of the world. You know, we always go to the Smoky Mountains and vacation. "Oh, there's a bear", you know, and Cades Cove, you know, that's where we go to see bears. Not in our backyard.

Norm Haley

You can stop short in Mentone now.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So, another one that we both get calls about is woodpeckers. And that's a... I'll let you talk about woodpeckers.

Norm Haley

Sure. So, woodpeckers, they're almost kind of a secondary wildlife damage pest. They're very they're very often, as we get calls for woodpeckers, they're actually trying to excavate the the larvae of carpenter bee more often than not whether it's in the side of a, you know, deck and, you know, lumber situation there or some cedar

paneling or shakes or something like that that the carpenter bees have put their larvae into. So that's one that you can actually prevent, the wildlife damage, is if you, you know, go ahead and reduce the carpenter bee opportunity for, for laying larvae through, you know, broadcast insecticides, things like permethrin-based sprays, you know, at 28-day intervals, roughly, whatever that is. I can't remember off the top of my head. It does take, take reapplication, but by stopping those larvae, you can essentially stop that woodpecker damage.

Now, that doesn't mean a whole lot once you're already having the woodpecker damage. Folks need to stop it right now, and I understand that. Pretty, pretty often, I'll make the recommendation of, again, kind of an exclusion technique. If you'll tack up some sheets or burlap or just something to keep as a barrier between that, that whatever, whatever wood resource or damage area those woodpeckers are causing trouble on, that helps a lot. You know, if they can't access the, the wood that they're trying to excavate those larvae out of or even just pick on-- it's not always just larvae, by the way-- they'll sometimes just make a, or find a place that makes just that, that sound they like when they're when they're up there hammering. And, you know, as they kind of, go through their seasonal rituals and attracting mates and, you know, marking territories, they will just sound off on those things that sound good. Yeah. So, if you can go ahead and just exclude those for a short time, they'll very often move on to, to another site.

Now, the one thing we cannot do, and something we've always got to consider, is the regulatory side of, of a wildlife damage control. And folks will call and talk and have inquiry about can I shoot, you know, X, Y or Z, hawk, owl, woodpecker, whatever it may be. Migratory birds are not on the options for lethal control.

So, something that's very important, you know, once we've identified that wildlife pest, to kind of go back to the beginning of our conversation, you do need to identify, you know, what, what you can do as far as the legalities and understand the regulations that go behind these species as well. So, we do not do lethal take of woodpeckers. We're trying to maintain them on the landscape. They have a lot of good ecological function, great birds. So, we're looking at exclusion and just trying to shoo them off and find a better place to spend their time.

Brian Brown

Yeah, I've seen a lot of people use reflective ribbons or the little the little pinwheels, things like that. Just something to, to scare them away.

Norm Haley

That's right. Yeah, that lots of the flashy and tapes and CD on a string, a pie plate. That's a that's a classic one to shoo off birds. That's good. That's good for temporary. Absolutely.

And then, you know, a final kind of a closing point to you. And we already have kind of talked about the just the persistence and the time these animals have on their hand, that there really is no, you know, magic, magic dust or silver bullet that I can tell you, Brian, you know, mothballs don't work for everything. It's a situation to where the more that you can apply those, what we like to call integrated pest management techniques, the exclusion, the hazing, lethal control, if necessary, things like that will go a long way rather than just relying on just, just one, just one factor to control whatever pest trouble that you're having.

That doesn't mean that all those techniques are, again, applicable to every species. But the more that we can apply, the essentially the shorter time frame we're going to have in achieving control and potentially the longer time frame we'll have towards maintaining control as well.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So that's, that's a great point. And you know, any time that you have questions about any animal that's causing damage on your property or eating your plants or whatever, feel free to reach out to us. That's what we're here for. As Extension agents, you can reach out to, to me. And if I don't know, a lot of times I'll send them to our forestry and wildlife person or even Norm right now, they're always here to answer your questions and you can send them pictures. I love getting pictures. I don't know about you.

Norm Haley

Pictures tell a thousand words. It saves us a lot of mileage budget and we're very efficient that way, we can help you quick.

Brian Brown

Yeah, yeah. So, you know text us pictures. We love to get those. It makes it a lot easier for us. So, take really good quality pictures. You know, reach out to us and, you know, if you have questions some of our publications are online. You can go to aces.edu and you can find those resources. And also, our contact information is on there as well. So, Norm thanks for joining us today. And again, if you have questions just feel free to contact us and see you next time.

Brian Brown

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