What to consider when fences are necessary

Ideally, open habitat with no fences is best for pronghorn, but where fences are necessary here are a few things to consider:

- Purpose of fence
- Location of fence
- Daily/seasonal movements of pronghorn
- Presence of food, water, and cover

A three to five-strand fence with the bottom strand being smooth wire can effectively accommodate pronghorn passing underneath. The bottom wire should be at least 18–20 inches above the ground (Figure 5).

Fig 5. (Left) A newly constructed pronghorn friendly fence built with 3 strands of barbed wire and smooth wire used for the bottom strand that is set at about 20 inches above the ground. (Right) A group of translocated pronghorn using a modified 5-strand barbed wire fence.
The importance of pronghorn-friendly fencing

Pronghorn inhabit the grasslands of west Texas. Prior to settlement, they occupied wide-open landscapes without man-made barriers. This enabled them to move across large expanses in search of food, water, and cover. The ability to move to areas with better range conditions (e.g., moving to an area that has recently received precipitation) to find necessary resources is critical for pronghorn. Fences can be barriers to these movements. Ultimately, this can affect the distribution and survival of pronghorn, especially during drought.

Pronghorn have learned to traverse fences by crawling underneath them, but if the bottom wire is too low (Figure 1), movements may be impeded. Some pronghorn have learned to jump fences; however, most are reluctant. Net-wire fencing is usually a complete barrier to pronghorn movements and is not recommended.

Fence corners have proven to be focal areas for pronghorn movements (Figure 2). Pronghorn trying to traverse a fence or escape predators often follow fences into corners. In fact, it is common for coyotes to use fence corners to aid in capturing pronghorn. Therefore, it is imperative that all fence corners be modified to allow for pronghorn movements (Figure 3).

Tumbleweeds can also be a major barrier when the plants get blown into and hang up along fences (Figure 4). Having an appropriate pronghorn friendly fence will help minimize fence blockage by tumbleweeds. In some cases, this can happen regardless of fence type. In areas where tumbleweeds are a problem, unnecessary fences should be removed to eliminate this from occurring or maintain fence modifications so tumbleweeds do not block the openings.

Right-of-way fences along highways can be impenetrable barriers to pronghorn. However, if one makes it through a right-of-way fence, it may get trapped between the highway and fence. This increases the chance of pronghorn being hit by a vehicle. Cooperation between landowners in providing fence modifications along highways is an important element in facilitating safe pronghorn movements across highways.

Remedies for Existing Fences

These recommendations are based upon field experience and research, and have proven to successfully facilitate pronghorn passage through fences without increasing the incidence of calves crawling underneath.

The negative impacts restrictive fences have on pronghorn movements and survival cannot be overstated.

1. Raise bottom wire or net-wire a minimum of 18–20 inches above ground for at least 20 yards every ½ mile of fence (Figures 1, 2)
2. Replace bottom strand of barbed wire with smooth wire wherever possible
3. Modifications should be placed near fence corners and in natural travel corridors
4. Remove old fences that are no longer necessary (removal of posts and stays is essential; if not removed pronghorn will think the fence still exists)

When building a new fence in pronghorn range, be mindful of their requirements and their need to travel across vast expanses of landscape in search of resources and to escape predators. Please contact TPWD for technical assistance regarding pronghorn friendly fencing.