



**FOUNDATION FOR
RABBIT FREE AUSTRALIA**

Awareness Strategy 2007

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Acknowledgement:

Mr. Kim Mitchell, Senior Consultant, Currie Communications Pty Ltd, facilitated a successful workshop with RFA's Committee in September 2006 to develop an Awareness Strategy. This strategy is based on his report of the workshop.

OVERVIEW

It has been just over 10 years since the escape and subsequent controlled release of the Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD) in Australia.

During that time research into effective application of existing and potential/emerging rabbit control technologies has declined. Arguably, the focus for natural resource management research and development (and thus funding) has moved away from vertebrate pest control toward issues such as salinity, climate variability and water security.

The Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia Inc (RFA) is concerned that the significant gains made from RHD on Australia's wild rabbit populations in the mid-1990s has led to the need for continuing R,D & E becoming largely unrecognised in natural resource management and policy arenas, leading to a reduction in communication and extension efforts for wild rabbit population control.

In some cases, the abovementioned 'big' issues currently under focus by government and industry potentially have linkages to wild rabbit populations, particularly in relation to native flora and fauna management and potential for recovery of species threatened by these other external factors.

Currie Communications was engaged to assist Rabbit Free Australia (RFA) to undertake the following tasks:

- Assist the Foundation to develop an Awareness Strategy that both complements and accelerates communication elements of the RFA Strategic Plan
- Provide communication ideas and direction to support this plan in the key areas of public awareness, government (policy) recognition of the RFA goals and current work and in assisting the Foundation to increase its membership and sponsor base.

Currie facilitated a half-day communication planning session with the RFA Executive Committee in September 2006, focusing on the following key areas:

- Identifying the communication challenge
- Analysis of the current communication situation
- Communication and awareness Goals and Objectives
- Developing Tools and Tactics

This strategy was developed from the outcomes of that workshop to provide a framework for the Foundation's communication activities and promote further discussion among RFA members.

A VISION OF SUCCESS

Aims of the awareness strategy include:

- Increased RFA membership base (individual, corporate and institutional members).
- Heightened acknowledgement in the natural resource management and farming communities that wild European rabbits are still a major environmental and production pest, despite the success of RHD and its predecessors in controlling wild rabbit populations over the past decade.
- Raised awareness of the Foundation, and its call for urgency that further research and development into RHD and the 'next generation' of control agents is critical right now, for such agents to be effective and/or delivered in 10-50 years' time.
- Increased levels of funding from non-government sources to help the RFA maintain its independent status.

EXPERIENCED CAMPAIGNERS

A review of past and current successes revealed novel work on rabbit research and awareness has been a hallmark of RFA over the past 15 years. Committee members cited the following achievements as indicators of the effectiveness of RFA as an organisation:

- Established, long-term and coherent Foundation with a unique balance of researchers, landholders, environmental campaigners and other well networked and well-credentialed individuals.
- Investment in the seed funding for early research into the potential of RHD as a biological control agent for wild rabbit populations in Australia.
- The launching of the highly successful 'Easter Bilby' awareness concept in partnership with Haigh's Chocolates.
- High level of independent scientific expertise to provide clarity to government and industry on all aspects of rabbit control and their impact on total grazing pressure in Australian landscapes.
- The recent successful establishment of an AWI/MLA funded project, managed by the Invasive Animals CRC, studying the effective use of RHD and the economic and environmental costs of rabbits. This funding was prompted by the outcomes of a national workshop (Rabbit R&D Directions) convened by RFA in May 2005.
- Membership of the national Rabbit Research Advisory Group convened by the Invasive Animals CRC.

THE 'HONEST BROKER'

RFA is aiming to strategically position itself as the 'honest broker' to complement its position as a minor, independent funding source in relation to creative and well-targeted research into controlling Australia's wild rabbit population.

The Foundation has consistently proven to be a critical link between conservation, extension, awareness (of both the problem, and the management options available) through to technical advice and delivery of R&D outcomes.

The Foundation also is in a position to comment on government (both state and federal) policy regarding rabbit issues.

RFA aims to continue maintaining this role. However, it now seeks to accelerate awareness that RHD requires significant support in on-ground control to improve its effectiveness, while at the same time new control agents need to be discovered.

ALLIES

The Foundation lists the following organisations as potential allies in getting its message delivered to key audiences:

- State Agencies concerned with rabbit control (NRM Boards, Rural Lands Protection Boards and conservation agencies).
- Animal Control Technologies Australia (ACTA) - distributors of Pindone, 1080 and other complementary control agents for vertebrate pests.
- The Invasive Animals CRC (which is developing new off-the-shelf RHD products such as baits, etc).
- Australian Campaign for Rabbit Eradication (ACRES) - Rotary International.
- Conservation NGOs (eg. Conservation Council of South Australia)

POTENTIAL BARRIERS

Even with the significant successes that RFA has enjoyed over the past 15 years, a number of potential barriers to the aims of the awareness strategy being successful in its implementation were identified by the Executive Committee. These are outlined in the following SWOT analysis of the Foundation's current communication activities.

With these elements in mind, it will be critical that RFA segments both its target audiences and key messages to ensure the awareness strategy revolves around a key principle of 'message received, not message sent'.

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT COMMUNICATION SITUATION

Strengths:

- The strategic plan has a significant emphasis on awareness.
- Positive, proactive culture in RFA toward improving communication.
- Significant number of highly credible 'experts' available to RFA to act as spokespeople in relation to vertebrate pest control, RHD, epidemiology, on-ground actions, etc.
- Some communication concepts are already well established (e.g. Easter Bilby campaign, website, etc).
- 'Runs on the board' – established networks and recognition with core target audiences.
- Stakeholder driven, not just science driven.

Weaknesses:

- Small executive and membership base, big responsibility, modest budget.
- Communication responsibility may be hard to pass on to research teams who are mainly funded through other sources.
- Up against a lack of political urgency to invest in new wild European rabbit control agents and/or support for effective utilisation of RHD.
- Poor understanding of the message that numbers of wild European rabbits are actually increasing, despite prolonged drought and no known resistance to RHD in Australian wild rabbit populations.
- Winding down of state resources for rabbit R,D&E
- Absence of evaluation of success of RFA efforts

Opportunities:

- High quality science, specialist focus– new discoveries will happen.
- Opportunity to push electronic communication to new boundaries.
- Native flora and fauna evoke emotions – plenty of positive stories to balance the bad news.
- NRM boards and Catchment Management groups
- Partnerships

Threats:

- Other related, or unrelated, vertebrate pest research, advocacy, activism.
- Animal welfare evokes emotions – the death of anything is difficult to communicate.
- ‘Silly science’ factor – who to believe in a potentially noisy/competitive market?
- Other issues may swamp the message (eg, drought, climate change, energy use, nuclear energy)

CAMPAIGN THEMES

Four clear campaign ‘themes’ or ‘pillars’ were determined by the Committee.

1. **Wild European rabbits are still a problem in your area and are likely to get worse**
2. **Influencing rabbit control through NRM / Catchment-based Boards**
3. **More research and development is needed into wild rabbit control**
4. **On-farm actions (you can undertake right now)**

KEY MESSAGES

Underpinning the awareness strategy will be a number of key messages, tailored to suit the needs of the various audiences at a government, industry, environment and community level.

New language may be introduced via the awareness campaign, focusing on the urgency to protect the landscape from continuing damage by wild rabbits, to secure Australia’s unique biological diversity.

With this in mind, the following messages have emerged to date:

- Wild rabbit populations continue to be a problem in Australian landscapes, and are likely to get worse.
- Continuous monitoring is showing wild rabbit populations are continuing to rise, despite prolonged drought and no known genetic resistance to RHD in Australia.
- New research is required to help us understand the impact and interaction between RHD and wild rabbits and the most appropriate control options for integrated pest management at a landscape-scale.
- While RHD has been very effective in many regions, it's time to take the next step in investing in research to identify control options for the future. We must learn from the increase in rabbit numbers and damage aided by complacency towards rabbit R&D and lack of on-ground control following the success of myxomatosis in the 1950s.
- It has never been more important to start looking for new options - we need to start discovering the tools required to better protect Australia's biological security for the next 10-50 years right now.
- Research has determined that the rabbit problem in your area really is your problem – wild rabbit populations are mostly local.

CONTROL PHRASES, APPLICATION OF KEY MESSAGES

It's important to note that research in the field is showing wild rabbit numbers are increasing once again across Australia. Current research is determining whether the increase is caused by genetic resistance to RHDV in rabbits, or a change in RHDV itself.

The main point is that while RHD has been extremely successful in many areas, we can't stand still in relation to the discovery of new control technologies for wild rabbits – Australia's biological security is at risk unless new management options are determined for the next 10-50 years.

It's worth remembering that if you have wild rabbits, they actually are your problem – rabbits tend to stay local, so it is important to have effective control strategies and follow-up of populations in place for your property.

In relation to Key Messages, a range of back-to-basics 'myth busting' statements are required (similar to the last key message, above) together with simple and easy-to-digest, scientifically-based information about rabbit populations and RHD. This would assist land managers and policy audiences re-think current opinions about wild rabbits and the urgency for control.

The messages need to be highly tailored to the various audience segments and revolve around the concept of 'risk'. This is explored further in Tools and Tactics.

TARGET AUDIENCES

Target audiences for RFA are strongly focused on influencing rabbit R,D&E, on-ground rabbit control and policy development for natural resource management.

Key audiences include:

- Funding agencies concerned with rabbit control (e.g. rural R&D corporations).
- State and Federal government politicians and agencies (e.g. DEH, DPI, etc).
- Catchment Management / NRM Boards
- Local Government.
- Research institutions and facilitators (e.g. universities, CRCs, CSIRO).
- Primary producers (wool, meat, grain – high rainfall and pastoral zones) and Farmer advocacy groups (e.g. SAFF, NFF etc).
- Animal welfare groups (e.g. RSPCA).
- Animal rights groups (e.g. Animals Australia, PETA, etc).
- Media (specifically those who previously covered RHD issues and those with a current interest in science, NRM and agriculture).

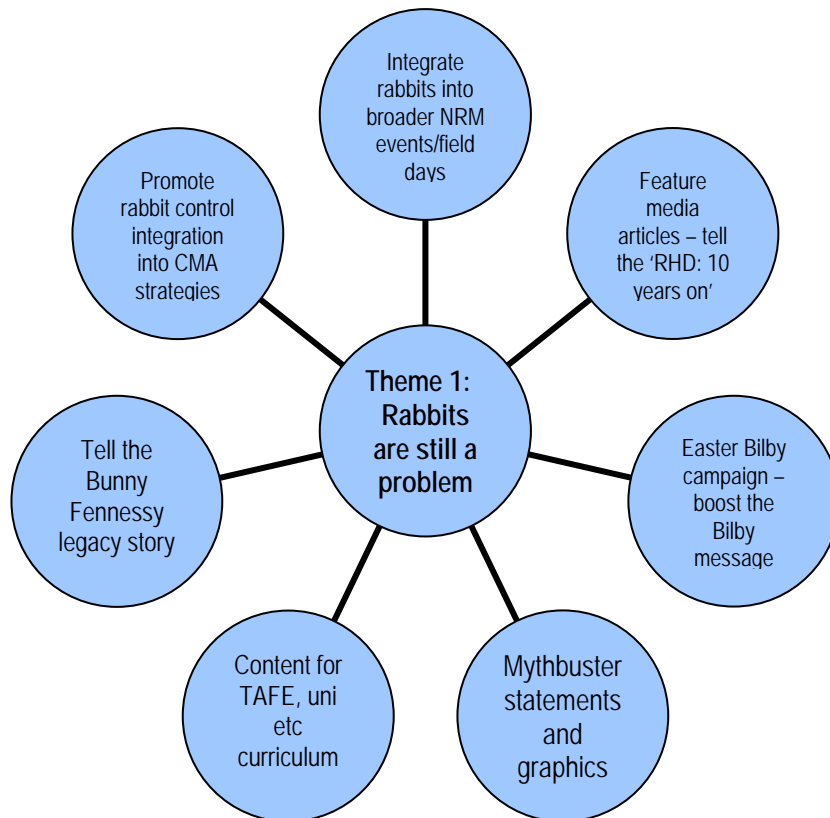
Other priority, but important audiences include:

- Hobby Farmers.
- Students.
- Aboriginal Land Management Corporations.
- Pet rabbit owners/pet shop owners.
- Veterinary specialists.

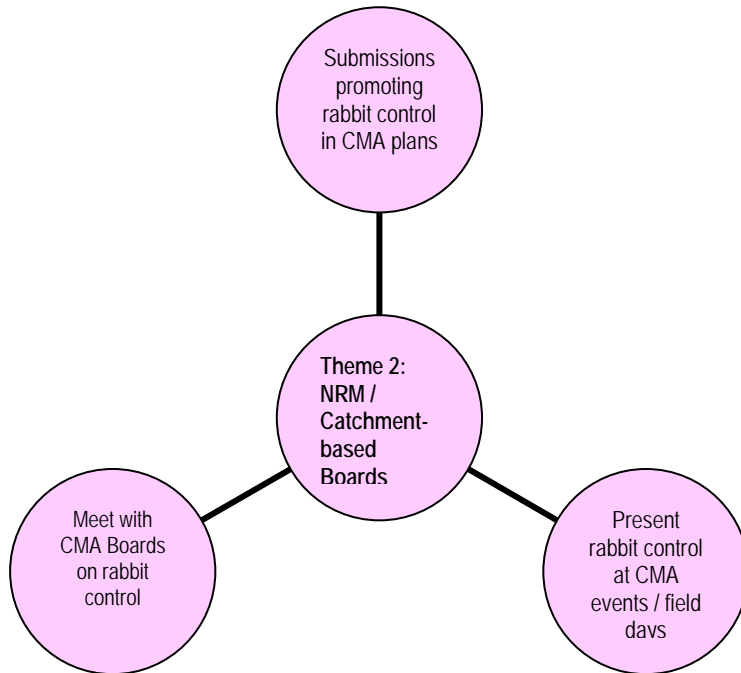
RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TACTICS - OVERVIEW

The following activities for each theme should be considered when actions are planned for the implementation of the awareness strategy.

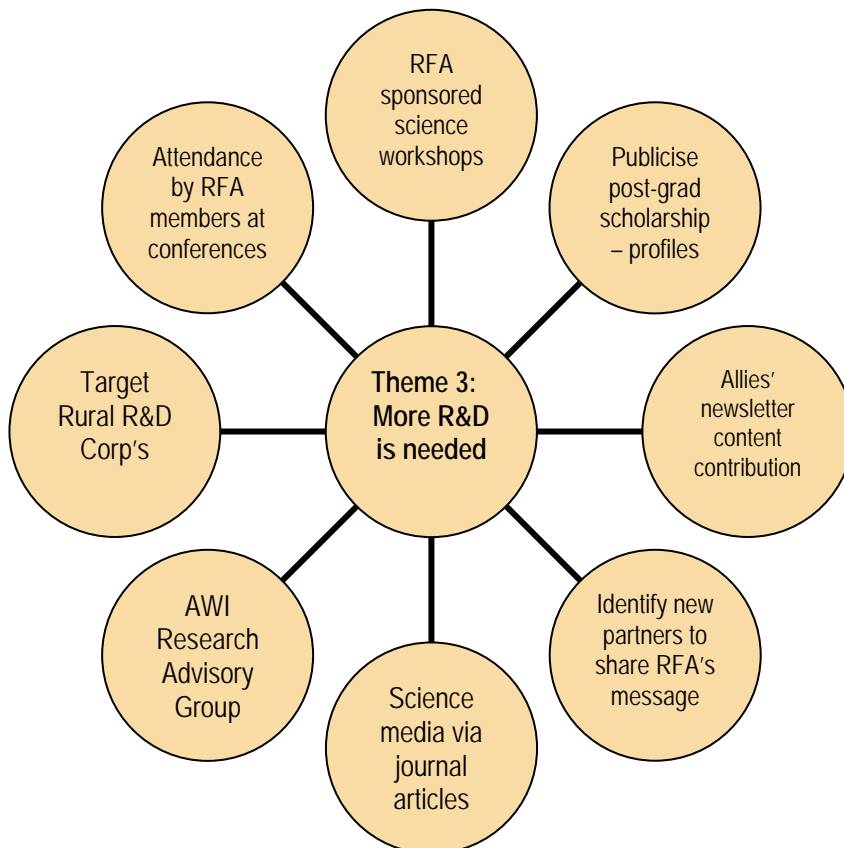
Theme 1: Wild European rabbits are still a problem in your area



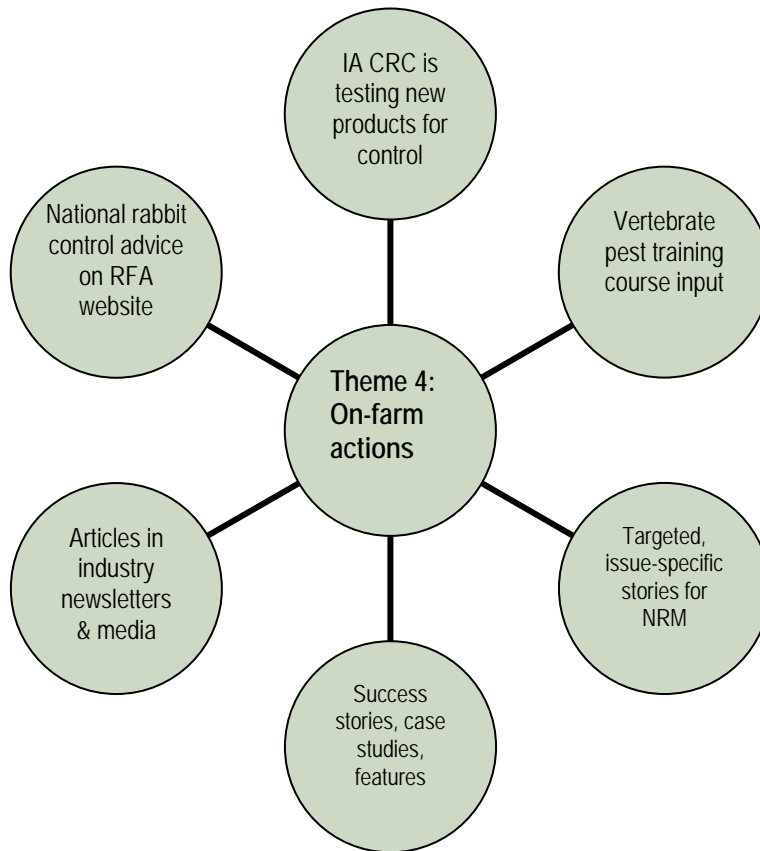
Theme 2: Influencing rabbit control through NRM / Catchment-based Boards



Theme 3: More research and development is needed into wild rabbit control



Theme 4: On-farm actions (you can undertake right now)



SUPPORT RESOURCES

A number of support resources currently exist that will have an important impact on enabling the Awareness Strategy.

These include the RFA's *Anti-Rabbit Roundup* and updated website.

Further support resources to ensure clarity and consistency of its campaign themes and communication of key messages are required. Such resources include:

1. Campaign Resource Kit

The multiplicity of organisations and initiatives associated with natural resource management and policy potentially often creates confusion on which elements of IPM are critical to invest in, particularly if it has a single issue focus. Such complications may also make it difficult for stakeholders to maintain a comprehensive understanding of RFA's role and current initiatives, and relationships between RFA and other initiatives associated with pest animal control.

The essential purpose of the RFA Campaign Resource Kit, which would be regularly updated, is to provide key internal and external stakeholders easy access to current information on credible research and rabbit control information from a range of sources for managers and policy advisers.

The Kits would provide users (e.g. RFA spokespersons or vertebrate pest control officers, etc) with the confidence, knowledge and skills to successfully communicate key messages relating to the rabbit population in Australia, the current situation in relation to management options and the importance of on-going research and extension.

The information would focus on research outcomes, key messages and implications for managers. Content might include:

- Background to the rabbit situation and also RFA, principles and objectives of IPM and vertebrate pest control specifically, elements, progress and challenges, and management arrangements;
- Introductory information resources about the RFA campaign (e.g. PowerPoint slides, images, graphics, publications, links to on-line resources) prepared in layperson's terms, together with more technical information designed to be pitched at about middle to senior policy or technical officer level.
- Images, charts and graphics for presentations, including media and field days.

Ideally, delivery of the Kits would be tailored to the level at which the organisations require an understanding of the issues and their need for additional and/or more integrated information. The products will be delivered through tools and pathways preferred by the organisations.

2. Market Research toward current attitudes

Some excellent generic, attitudinal research has been established in the past exploring community and farmer attitudes towards rabbits and rabbit control. New attitudinal research focusing on the information needs of (i.e. readiness for RFA's message), and even capacity building opportunities with, key target audiences is required.

Little objective, representative evidence is available on overall levels of awareness of the current status of wild rabbits in Australia, the damage they are causing (not just to agriculture) and existing attitudes toward RHD and even RFA.

This research would not only provide valuable feedback from which decisions could be made about the campaign and RFA's (and other organisations) future investment and efforts, but it would also enable information and awareness benchmarks to be established, and reveal any gaps that might be of benefit to the campaign. These benchmarks could be also revisited at a later date to determine how effective the Awareness Strategy has been in boosting the RFA profile and delivering against its stated aims.

Two options present themselves for market research to be carried out:

1. RFA may be able to organise and partially fund a postgraduate student to carry out the required research.
2. Currie Communications be approached to develop a joint research proposal with RFA to seek govt / industry funds for market research.

3. Feature articles for the three campaign themes

Significant opportunities exist to create high levels of awareness amongst all audiences with an initial, targeted media campaign focusing on the four core campaign areas (i.e. Rabbits are still a problem; NRM/Catchment boards; More R&D is needed; On-farm actions). The urgency of the issue to attract new funding suggests this should happen in 2007.

Assuming the content is comprehensive, compelling and well coordinated, targeted media is highly likely to cover each component of the story, which is designed to be greater than the sum of its parts. Given the relatively recent history of RHD in Australia, and its dramatic beginnings, there is a reasonably fresh 'imprint' with the media and wider public.

This however means the messages will need to be both provocative to capture attention, but also carefully crafted and based on robust scientific research and analysis (RFA and other) to minimise the level of adverse reaction. The recommended timing will capitalise on the 'one decade on' factor that is an interesting story in itself – particularly with those science, environment and agricultural journalists who covered the initial escape event in 1995-96.

Four 800-word stories be prepared (one for each theme) based on a combination of the compelling science/monitoring evidence that change is needed, credible and authoritative spokespersons, news-quality images and a high level of supporting 'evidence' – tables, graphics, research interpretations.

It is intended that the stories offer a balance of 'looming problem' and 'hope for the future'. It is critical that the campaign, on balance, leaves people with the impression that they can do something at a policy, research or farm/land management level once the dust has settled.

The previously mentioned Campaign Resource Kit would provide RFA representatives with baseline materials to assist with follow-up interviews with media. Partially, the campaign would target individual media outlets in the initial release phase but be also a story that is available to other outlets

One-to-one media briefings between target media and representatives from RFA and its partners in the campaign (researchers, etc) are required to initiate the relationship.

THE NEXT STEPS

This strategy will be used as the base for deciding on annual actions for RFA to promote the need for rabbit R,D&E and adoption of on-ground rabbit control. Such actions must be within the resources and capacity of RFA to implement successfully, and provide favourable effort / benefit ratios.