

2008 AGM & Chair's report

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RFA held its 16th Annual General Meeting at Adelaide Zoo in November 2008.

2008 has seen FRFA continuing to provide advice and direction to the community on Rabbit control. During this time we have considered applications ranging from the "robotic rabbit shooting machine", right through, to our own relevance. We have seen Governments change and the rise of new policy agendas, only then to be swamped by a world economic malaise. In such times, RFA remains very fortunate to have good expert advice through it's committee members and advisors and good commercial support provided by our major sponsor "HAIGHS.

Notwithstanding the "Global economic Crisis", there has been throughout this year, much public discussion concentrating on the impacts of climate change and the drought. While larger and sometimes, more popularist agendas have dominated public discussion, the committee has continued to receive anecdotal evidence for the resurgence in rabbits throughout much of areas where RHDV has suppressed numbers over the past decade. Our challenge is to be effective in keeping the message of rabbit control in the minds of Australians, especially those who make the decisions on Government funding.

By way of demonstrating these changing times, RFA was unable to conduct it's "Easter Bilby" promotion in the Rundle Street Mall again this year. In response, the committee believed that the time had come to reassess this program. With HAIGHS in agreeance, we have approached the Ade-

laide Zoo to investigate the possibilities being created by the Zoo's redevelopment. SA Zoos have responded positively and we look forward to more detailed discussion. It is our belief, that RFA can be enhanced by a closer working association with SA Zoos and similarly has much to offer in return.

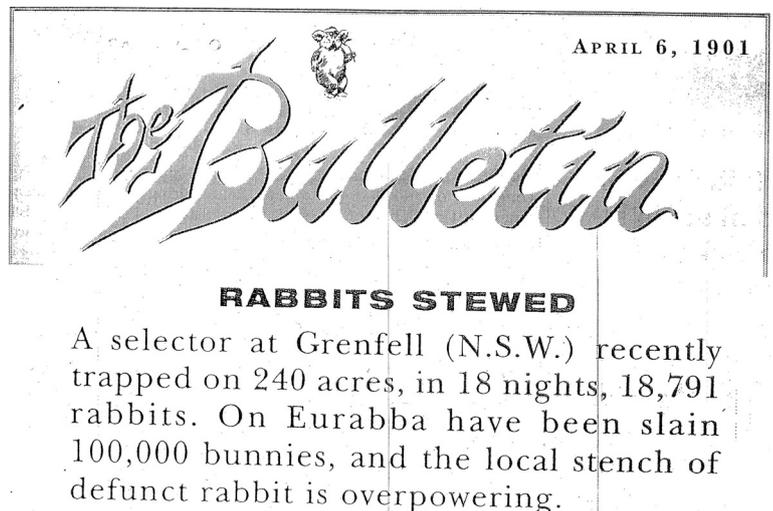
To further public awareness of the importance of continued rabbit control, the committee investigated engaging professional advertising advice. The proposed publicity campaign could not be guaranteed of success, regardless of the expenditure and so the committee decided against it. We have, rather, determined to develop closer working relationships with other national bodies with a view to involvement in national programs and publicity.

In July, I was able to attend the Australian Vertebrate Pest Conference in Darwin. Included in the approx. 130 presentations was an afternoon session on Rabbits, where Greg Mutze delivering a paper on "The effectiveness of RHDV releases for rabbit control". The afternoon tea, before the session, was "hosted" by FRFA. This gave the Foundation an opportunity to pre-

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Rabbit problems on the rise

Rabbit populations are reportedly increasing both size and range.

Reports of increasing rabbit populations are now widespread in many parts of South Australia and in other states, including the inland pastoral areas where RHD originally had its greatest impact, sparking concern that the effectiveness of RHD (calicivirus) as a biological control for rabbits is diminishing.

Also of great concern is evidence that rabbits are invad-

ing two new areas in Queensland where they had previously been absent or extremely uncommon.

In southeast Queensland, rabbits have expanded into some parts of the Moreton Rabbit Board area, centred on the Darling Downs.

In north Queensland, rabbits in the Atherton region are threatening World Heritage listed conservation reserves.

In both cases, it appears that rabbits have benefited from changing land use patterns and small founder populations have expanded their range and increased in numbers.

*Greg Mutze
Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation*

2008 Chair's report

(Continued from page 1)

sent itself to the conference and also to reinforce our relationship with the CRC for invasive animals. My impression remains that while there were many very impressive programs being undertaken, most were ultimately lacking adequate funding. The strongest message that I came away with from the conference, was the advantage of a quantifiable cost basis of the impact to the economy, for any proposal, if it is to be successful in attracting funding. To this end, FRFA has investigated whether this information is available in Australia for rabbit environmental and economic impact. Our advice is that this is near to completion and is potentially showing a far greater cost impact than previously considered. FRFA has written to the Rabbit Management Advisory Group with the intention to join them in using this information in making the case to corporations and Governments, of the value of effective rabbit control.

The Foundation continues to provide support for the RMAG and has corresponded with Government Members in support of its proposal for a centre for Biological Control of Rabbits. The Foundation continues to regard the funding of research as an important role and has just been advised by Dr. Brian Cooke, of a research project that may qualify. The proposed project would investigate whether rabbits selectively remove nutrient-rich plant parts thereby limiting intake of these micronutrients in sheep to levels that could affect breeding success. RFA also awarded a \$5000 Postgraduate Research grant to Mr. Peter Ellsworth for a

study titled "Investigating the body temperature profile of rabbits challenged with Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV)". We believe this research will provide important information to assist the use of RHDV as an effective biological control for European rabbits in Australia.

There has recently been a 'spike' in media interest, in rabbit numbers that we have been able to take advantage of. We have spoken with newspaper and radio journalists and have been advised that there has been some Government interest in response. We are also in the early stages of becoming involved with the CRC / RMAG and the ABC, on a national media program based upon the 150th year anniversary of the introduction of the rabbit pest. This is expected to create a great deal of public interest and represents an important opportunity for FRFA. More detailed information will be included in our next newsletter.

During this year we were advised that with the change in Governors' General, we would need to re apply to the incoming office holder to continue as Patron. The committee felt that this might be the time for the Foundation to look for a person who would be more relevant to, and effective for our cause. To that end, we seek nomination proposals from members for the committee's consideration. We believe that this opportunity will enhance FRFA and its cause.

Mr Timothy J. G. Rogers, Chairman
November 2008

A benign calicivirus is protecting rabbits from RHD

For some years, scientists have believed that another calicivirus was partly responsible for the limited effectiveness of RHD for controlling rabbit numbers in the high rainfall areas of south-eastern Australia.

Antibody tests used to identify rabbits that had survived RHD often gave unusual results that looked a bit like RHD but not quite, and these strange results also occurred in rabbit samples that had been collected before RHD was released in 1995.

Rabbits with the strange antibodies were less likely to die from RHD but were not completely immune – leading to the theory that a benign calicivirus was present in Australia that does not kill rabbits but provides partial cross-immunity against RHD.

A research project operating through the Invasive Animals CRC has been trying to find the benign virus and develop specific tests to determine where it commonly occurs and just how protective it really is.

Dr Tanja Strive, the virologist working on the project, has found several different types from 7 out of 10 sites in south-east Australia. Preliminary tests indicate that they provide up to 50% of infected rabbits with protection from the virulent RHD virus.

This work is of considerable importance in determining how best to manage rabbits in high rainfall areas – plans to reintroduce RHD will have no benefit where rabbits are already protected by antibodies to the benign virus.

FOUNDATION FOR A RABBIT FREE AUSTRALIA Annual General Meeting



Notice is hereby given that the SEVENTEENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING will be held in the Meeting Room of the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre office, 48 Oxford Terrace, UNLEY SA on MONDAY 23rd NOVEMBER 2009 at 2:00 pm.

*** Please note change of venue ***

**Membership and donation form is on the next page of your Newsletter.
Membership fees for 2009 are due by the AGM.**

For catering purposes, we would appreciate it if you could let us know if you plan to attend the AGM.

**RSVP to Keryn Lapidge on mb 0414 600 878, e-mail
admin@rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au**

Boosting the impact of RHD

Recent research by the South Australian Department of Water Land and Biodiversity Conservation, Queensland Department of Employment Economic Development and Innovation and the Invasive Animals Co-operative Research Centre, indicates rabbits at some sites have developed partial genetic resistance to RHD virus.

They are currently trying to determine whether genetic

change in the virus itself may also be involved.

In an attempt to counter the developing resistance to RHD, the Invasive Animals CRC is planning to import new strains of RHD virus from Europe during the next 3 years, for testing against RHD-resistant Australian rabbits.

Rabbits have been slower to recover from the impact of RHD in Europe than in Aus-

tralia - the greater genetic diversity of RHD virus in Europe is considered one possible cause for that geographic difference.

It is hoped that releasing new strains of RHD virus may provide a new lease of life to the virus in Australia.

RFA has committed funds to this project over the next three years in place of offering a Postgraduate Research Grant.

New strains of the RHD virus are being investigated

Rabbit control at Monarto Zoo

Richard Downward
Former Senior Adviser, Animal and Plant Control Commission.

This report has resulted from a request by Nicholas Newland on my interest in providing advice on what he perceived as a problem caused by a rabbit infestation at the Monarto Zoo during November 2008.

Subsequently I had a meeting in December 2008 at the Adelaide Zoo with Nicholas, Dr. Chris West (CEO of the Zoo) and Peter Clark (Monarto) to discuss the situation and arrange for a visit.

During our meeting I outlined my previous experience of rabbit control on the site which was part of the land acquired for a regional urban growth centre near Murray Bridge in the 1970s and for which I provided guidance for controlling rabbits to the Woods & Forests Department.

A paper on this successful control operation was distributed with a

suggestion that it could be used as a model to address the problem currently facing the Zoo and its neighbours.

Prior to this meeting I had contacted David Clifford who is the local rabbit control officer for the NRM Board and who has a good relationship with Peter Clark and his staff.

He has a good knowledge of the circumstances at the Zoo and reported that the rabbit problem had increased from the low levels reported in my paper, but was satisfied that the zoo was addressing their problems but said that the situation was complicated by the threat of reinvasion from some neighbouring properties, the special circumstances caused by the Zoo's animals and the presence of quite large numbers of emus which quickly remove large quantities of oats from trails laid to combat rabbits.

I visited Monarto in January 2009 and met with Peter Clark, Tim

Jenkins and John who is responsible for much of the practical control work carried out on site.

We had a very cordial discussion of the situation and I passed on some comments from Greg Mutze, who is one of the State's senior research scientists on rabbits, about the likely incidence of myxomatosis in the area as a result of the rains in December.

He had also said that there was a possibility of experimenting with the distribution of bait-carried RCD virus on the site but that this would be helped by regular blood samples to determine the levels of antibodies in the rabbit population. These samples would need to be taken by zoo staff during their normal trapping and shooting activities.

Greg had also said that he did not expect that environmental conditions would be suitable to spread the disease until mid April if the population proved to be susceptible.

Rabbit control at Monarto Zoo continued

Tim Jenkins, John and I carried out a cursory inspection through the areas which they said were the main areas of concern and my assessment was of an infestation which would be rated at Medium on the classification outlined in my paper which suggests a significant regression from that recorded in 1980 but much less than the original infestations of 1975.

Most of the infestations occur in the remnant native vegetation patches which provide significant cover for many 'scrub' rabbits which live on the surface rather than in burrows and also probably

much of the sustenance needed for their survival.

Much of these populations should be able to be catered for by the baitlayers drawn by the Quad bikes currently used by some NRM boards which can travel through light scrub without damage to the vegetation, vehicles or personnel. An alternative to this equipment which we canvassed was the possibility of using Green Corp personnel who could hand spread bait without furrows (this could also be a strategy to minimise the emu problem).

The banks of Dry Creek which pass through much of the worst infestations have warrens which are difficult to rip because of the terrain and this operation could probably be simplified if a modified backhoe could be employed. Improvements to normal ripping operations with three point linkage tractors can be achieved by using the double action ripper available through the NRM board.

Where possible adjoining blocks should be treated together or sequentially should stock need to be shifted.

Other news

Executive Officer position

The RFA Executive Officer, Keryn Lapidge will stand down from the position after this AGM to concentrate on her increasing workload within the CRC for Invasive Animals. The Committee would like to acknowledge her considerable contribution to the Foundation over these past three years. Keryn has provided excellent counsel to the committee and we have benefited much from her professional knowledge as well as organisational skills. The committee is examining the options available for a replacement, including from within the membership. On behalf of the Foundation, I would like to thank Keryn and wish her well in her future. Tim Rogers, Chair.

Rabbiting On Competition

The 'Rabbiting On' competition, which encouraged the public to share their rabbit stories online, was run successfully by ABC Rural early this year. The competition was sponsored by the IA CRC and Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) with RFA contributing \$5000 towards the final prize. Haigh's

also provided Easter chocolate hampers to the winners. Both senior and junior winners were from WA and thoroughly enjoyed their prize of a family trip to AWC's Scotia Sanctuary in western NSW. Stories can still be submitted and can be read at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/rural/features/rabbitingon/>

RabbitScan project

The National Rabbit Management Advisory Group (RMAG) and the Invasive Animals CRC (IACRC) generated much interest with their RabbitScan project this year. RabbitScan maps show rabbits are increasingly edging into our cities, with reports of damage to urban sportsgrounds, golf clubs and parks. The maps were recently released by the Australian Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon Tony Burke MP. The maps are available on the RabbitScan website:

<http://www.rabbitscan.net.au/>

New economic report shows rabbits are still Australia's worst Agricultural pest

A new report commissioned by the IA CRC reveals the economic impact of rabbits, wild dogs, mice, foxes and feral pigs and pest birds is estimated at over \$740 million per year.

Launched in August by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Honourable Tony Burke MP, the analysis also shows the economic impact of a select group of feral animals is just the tip of the iceberg. Rabbits are estimated at causing around \$200 million in damage each year, and wild dogs at almost \$50 million. The report and associated media release can be accessed at:

<http://www.invasiveanimals.com/>

Membership fee increase

RFA Membership fees have increased for the first time in many years, as agreed to at the AGM last year. The new fee structure is shown overleaf on the Membership form.

FOUNDATION FOR RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA



Membership and Donation Form - 2009

Details for Membership or Donation

Title _____ Surname _____ Given Names _____

Organisation _____

Address _____

_____ State _____ Postcode _____

Phone _____ Fax _____ Mobile _____

E-mail Address _____

DONATIONS OVER \$2.00 TO THE FOUNDATION ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE

I would like to contribute/pledge \$ _____ to support RFA's funding of rabbit research programs

MEMBERSHIP OF THE FOUNDATION FOR RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA

I would like to become a member of the Foundation for the period 1 November 2009 to 31 October 2010

<u>Subscription Fees</u>	<u>Tick Box</u>
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Student	\$10.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
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General	\$50.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Corporate	\$250.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
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TOTAL	\$ _____	
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SEND PAYMENTS TO

Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia
c/- 48 Oxford Terrace
UNLEY SA 5061

Subscriptions for 2009 RFA membership
are due by the AGM (23rd November 2009).
Thankyou to those members who have already paid
their subscriptions this year

Office Use Only

Membership fee paid on _____ / ____ / ____

Amount \$ _____

Membership receipt number _____

Donation amount \$ _____

Donation receipt number _____

Receipt(s) posted _____ / ____ / ____