

From the President

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RFA Supported by:



Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia Inc.

PO Box 145

Collinswood SA 5081

Tel: 0407 721 195

Email: admin@rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au

Web: www.rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au

This newsletter is the second for this calendar year and provides the means for keeping our membership and other readers informed and interested in our activities as a not-for-profit foundation dedicated to help to rid Australia of its worst vertebrate pest.

Both I and other members of the RFA Committee hope the newsletter will encourage others in the community, particularly land managers, researchers and corporations involved in environmental management and agri-business to take up membership and support our efforts.

The recent federal election presents an opportunity for RFA to re-assert itself with those in the public sector who are about to shoulder responsibility for policy articulation and funding support for activities that are in the public interest. I write this article in the week when Prime Minister-elect Hon. Tony Abbott has named his Cabinet. The RFA Committee has noted that Mr Barnaby Joyce and Hon. Greg Hunt have been allotted the agriculture and environment portfolios respectively. We note that there is no science portfolio and will watch with interest what sort of arrangements will be developed for supporting research activities in biological sciences and natural resources management.

We will also be wanting to ensure that ministers in the agriculture and environment sectors of government are aware of our existence and objectives. In doing this, we will be seeking to retain and enhance our existing relationships with agencies of government and also with publicly funded groups such as the Invasive Animals CRC. The next few months will be important timing for such activities and we have already been exploring how best to do so with people who have previously had ministerial responsibilities in these areas.

In addition, we have been exploring how we can contribute to research effort on 'the next' biocontrol agent for rabbits through discussions with the University of Adelaide. The RFA Committee is fortunate to be receiving advice from Professor James McWha AO who recently retired as Vice Chancellor. He and I met with Professor Mike Brooks, Deputy Vice Chancellor Research from the University a few weeks ago. Professor Brooks showed real interest and undertook to follow up the suggestion with his colleagues. We await his considered response.

RFA is delighted that the Invasive Animals CRC has spearheaded the appointment of a National Rabbit Management Facilitator in conjunction with the Victorian Department of Primary Industries and Environment. Dr Lisa Adams has been appointed to this key role and is well advanced in developing her approach to the task. RFA has offered what assistance it can and has been asked to partake in a Steering Committee to assist and advise Dr Adams. Dr Adams has also accepted an invitation to be the guest speaker at the RFA annual general meeting on 21 November. We hope as many members as possible and others will attend this event, details of which are contained in this newsletter.

From my moving around the country and from what I hear from friends and associates, the rabbit problem continues to build in many localities. The RFA Committee continues to pursue activities in the research and awareness areas where it can use its non-partisan, not-for-profit status to influence thinking and priorities and to contribute funding within its means to make a difference. We rely on your support and continuing interest to make these activities successful.

Nicholas Newland AM
President

Rabbit numbers – rising or falling?



Rabbit damage on regenerating Senna – recovering rabbit populations are knocking out vegetation that recovered after the spread of RHD

It is now 18 years since rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD, known also as rabbit calicivirus disease) first spread across Australia and knocked rabbit numbers down to the lowest levels since the 1950s, when myxomatosis had a similar impact. We all know that rabbit numbers recovered partially during the 20 years after myxomatosis. Fortunately, myxo still had and has ongoing benefits - rabbits have never reached their disastrous pre-myxo levels, except in the arid zone where there were insufficient biting insects to spread the myxoma virus effectively. Rabbit numbers also began a similar recovery from the effect of RHD in about 2004, but it is still not clear where the equilibrium will settle, what level of ongoing benefit we will get from RHD in its current form, and to what extent we will be able to manipulate that outcome by releasing new strains of RHD virus from overseas.

Until about 18 months ago the news was all grim, with escalating reports of rabbit numbers and rabbit damage from many sources. I think the underlying trend is still increasing rabbit numbers across most of the country, but with a very high degree of variability, including some substantial declines due to RHD activity and seasonal trends.

During the past 5 years, numbers rose to extremely high levels at some sites. Rabbits were developing genetic resistance to RHD and there had been two years of favourable seasonal conditions across most of southern Australia that boosted their breeding success. Many sites peaked two years ago, following very high rainfall in 2011, leading to high rabbit numbers

in 2011/12.

Since then, the reports from around South Australia have been extremely variable. The detailed data we have for two sites, at Turretfield Research Centre, near Gawler, and in the Coorong, show a significant decline in the past 2 years. Spotlight counts collected by staff on Flinders Ranges National Park, also declined steadily for the past 2 years and are now < 20% of their peak. This is in part, a seasonal correction due to local vegetation response. During the period of low rabbit numbers some of the perennial native grasses that are important food sources for rabbits were able to recover. Then the combination of partial recovery from RHD and a few good seasons allowed rabbit populations to overshoot the mark and remove the accumulated 'haystack' of perennial feed, suppressing the grasses, and carrying capacity has declined again.

Shooters conducting camel culling on the northern Nullarbor plain reported extremely high rabbit numbers late last year and staff from the Australian Wildlife Conservancy reserve at Kalamurina, on the northern end of Lake Eyre, are seeing the highest rabbit numbers for decades. But in the past 6 months rabbit numbers have crashed on the Nullarbor and shooters operating north of Yunta are seeing very low rabbit numbers, despite reasonable seasonal conditions. So what is going on?

Part of the reason for this variability (other than seasonal effects) is that the RHD virus and rabbits are co-evolving. The rabbits develop a bit of genetic resistance, so numbers rise. However, the virus also changes genetically, very

slightly, in the environment all the time – most of the changes have no effect but if a slightly more virulent RHD virus strain emerges it infects more rabbits than less virulent strains and is more likely to spread, so it knocks the rabbits down again briefly. Then the rabbits develop resistance to that, etc, etc. The rabbits have been staying a bit ahead but the recent trends might indicate that the virus has done a significant catch-up in the past year or so.

On top of all this is the unknown benefit to come from new RHD virus strains from overseas that are currently being tested by the Invasive Animals CRC in the 'RHD Boost' program. Some of the overseas strains are distinctly different from anything circulating in Australia and may be able to get around the genetic resistance developing in wild rabbits. We are still a couple of years away from knowing.

In the meantime we are urgently trying to work out exactly what strains of RHD virus are out there in different parts of Australia, and how virulent they are. We can only get virus from rabbits that have recently died of the disease so ***please let us know if you see evidence of an unexpected sudden die off of rabbits and can locate a fresh carcass.*** Contact me or one of my colleagues at the numbers below and we'll arrange the rest.

Greg Mutze 08 83039505
greg.mutze@sa.gov.au

Ron Sinclair 08 83039506
ron.sinclair@sa.gov.au

John Kovaliski 08 83039503
john.kovaliski@sa.gov.au

Greg Mutze Biosecurity SA

FOUNDATION FOR RABBIT FREE AUSTRALIA Annual General Meeting



Notice is hereby given that the **TWENTYFIRST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING** will be held at The Santos Conservation Centre, Plain Tree Drive, Adelaide Zoo on **THURSDAY 21st NOVEMBER, 2013** at 2:00 pm.

Membership and donation form is on the last page of your Newsletter.

Membership fees for 2013/2014 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 Edwina Grant on mb 0407 721 195,
e-mail admin@rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au**

GUEST SPEAKER DR LISA ADAMS, NEW NATIONAL MANAGEMENT RABBIT FACILITATOR (SEE NEWSLETTER INSERT)

Haigh's Chocolates wins ACRE award

The ACRE award for 2013 was presented to Haigh's Chocolates for 20 years of rabbit free production of Chocolate. They have produced chocolate Bilbys as an alternative to promote conservation of our native animal which has been depleted by rabbits destroying their habitat. Part proceeds of sales have assisted RFA in their support of research efforts to eradicate rabbits and protect the environment.

Over the years Haigh's have supported ACRE (Australian Campaign for Rabbit Eradication, a ROTARY initiative of Districts 9500 and 9520) by distributing Bilby coloring in books.

ACRE encourages landholders, soil groups and other bodies in their efforts to eradicate rabbits. It also distributes pamphlets with information outlining the destruction they cause and methods of eradication. Each year it presents an award to a successful group.

Chairman Neville Sharpe along with other members of ACRE presented Alister Haigh with the ACRE award and poster to be displayed.

Neville Sharpe, Chairman, ACRE



Neville Sharpe presents ACRE award to Alister Haigh

FOUNDATION FOR RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA

Membership and Donation Form - 2013/2014

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 2013 to 31 October 2014

Subscription Fees Tick Box

Student \$20.00

General \$50.00

Corporate \$250.00

TOTAL \$ _____

SEND PAYMENTS TO

Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia
PO Box 145
COLLINSWOOD
SA 5081Subscriptions for 2013/2014 RFA membership
are due by the AGM (21st November, 2013).

Thank you to those members who have already paid their subscriptions this year

Support the Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia - become a member:Forms can be downloaded at: http://www.rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au/membership_form.html