

Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia

Annual General Meeting 20 November 2014 Chairman's Report to Members.

It is with pleasure that I report to the membership on behalf of the RFA Committee for the 2013/14 year.

The Committee met four times during the year in review and most of those meetings were held at the South Road offices of Primary Producers SA. We thank PPSA for the use of its facilities provided to us free of charge. Deane Crabbe from PPSA agreed to join the Committee, thus providing a useful link. Other Committee members Neil Andrew AO, Fairlie Bartholomaeus, Peter Dunn, Dr Bruce Munday and Richard Downward have all been regular and valuable attendees along with Mr Greg Mutze as science adviser whose experience and wisdom has been especially valued by all. Treasurer William Morgan continues to provide an essential service in keeping the Foundation's finances in good order and advising on best husbandry of the Foundation's assets. Executive officer Edwina Grant has remained enthusiastic about her role in managing the Foundation's business affairs.

In relation to the Foundation's financial position, I am pleased to say that our business plan to invest funds on blue chip sharemarket stocks has continued to be successful, with the Foundation slightly improving its equity position from last year by about \$8,000.00. This was notwithstanding some unforeseen expenses that impacted on net income.

The Foundation's financial stability has allowed the Committee to support financially a range of projects, including cutting-edge research on a rabbit genomics project being undertaken by PhD student Amy Ianella through the University of Adelaide, the details of which were in our last newsletter to members. Another research project being supported by the Committee is focused on the transmissibility of RHD, an epidemiological factor of the disease that has not been well enough understood since the initial release of the Czech strain of RHD in 1995. This has been proposed by Dr Nina Schwensow from Berlin on secondment to the University of Adelaide and in collaboration with RFA patron Dr Brian Cooke. Nina is the AGM guest speaker this year and will explain to members what her project involves. This work is very topical given plans by the NSW Government in conjunction with the Invasive Animals CRC in 2016 to release a Korean strain of RHD known as K5 discovered as a result of the RHD Boost project to which RFA has been a financial contributor.

RFA funding support of up to \$20K/year over 3 years is contingent on Nina finding other funding partners to meet the requirements of the Australian Research Council who would be the principal funding contributor. At this stage, Nina has not been successful in securing other non-government funding partners, but continues to explore these possibilities.

Other things that RFA has become involved in include contributing financially to the work of the Foundation for Australia's Most Endangered Species, which is spearheading a project for the re-introduction of the Western Quoll to the Flinders Ranges. Quolls were once quite common in southern Australia but have been extinct for about 100 years. Quolls or native cats prey on rabbits and their re-introduction into the Flinders Ranges National Park will provide plenty of rabbits as a source of food. The quolls are being provided by the Western Australian government from a remnant population in the southwest of that state. RFA has received good publicity from this involvement.

RFA is also interested in the work of Dr David Peacock who is scouring the world for a potential new biocontrol agent for rabbits in Australia once RHD has run its course or to operate in sympathy with it. This work has a long planning horizon, but given the tenacity of the wild rabbit in Australia, is well worth starting now. A workshop in Canberra in early November examined potential options already identified and narrowed the current list to three principal areas for more follow-up.

The RFA Committee has been working periodically with Dr Lisa Adams as National Rabbit Management Facilitator operating through the Victorian Department of Primary Industry and Environment. We have been most encouraged by Lisa's work, which among other things has been focused on the various factors (scientific, cultural, social, economic, logistical and governance) that must be considered to ensure the planned release of the K5 RHD virus is as effective as possible, noting that the 'silver bullet' factor must be part of these considerations. RFA is assisting where we can and I have been asked to become involved to help in this key facilitation work. Lisa has recently moved to other duties and her previous role has been taken up by Mr Michael Reid.

RFA has also been in discussions with Professor Andy Lowe about a project suggested by Committee member Dr Bruce Munday to assess wild rabbit impact post wildfire. These discussions are ongoing.

Members' continued support is an essential part of making these activities successful and please encourage your friends and colleagues to join if they can. It certainly helps to leverage support from industry and government and we as a Committee will continue to identify opportunities for targeted investment and to raise awareness of the impact of rabbits on the environment and primary industry and importantly, the risks to such assets while rabbit numbers regain or remain at levels where loss of genetic diversity and production continues to occur.

Nicholas Newland AM
Chairman
13 November 2014