

FOUNDATION FOR A RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA'S SUBMISSION TO:

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT ON AGRICULTURE OF PEST ANIMALS

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

Summary

- Foundation for a Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA) is the only non-profit, publicly-funded organisation with the principal purpose of supporting rabbit research and control in Australia.
- RFA is greatly concerned that the exceptional agricultural (economic), environmental and social benefits from RHD will continue to be lost through post-RHD complacency amongst governments, land managers, R&D funding corporations and the community.
- The rabbit, even following the occurrence of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD), formerly known as rabbit calicivirus, is the number one economic vertebrate pest in Australia. The rabbit is also a serious threat to many natural ecosystems.
- Given the above points, RFA was pleased to convene a national Workshop recently in Adelaide that identified critical R&D directions for rabbit management. This workshop involved invited research, industry and landowner leaders in rabbit management.
- RFA is delighted that Meat and Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation followed up the Workshop with a joint brief for a consultancy to strategically review rabbit research, development and extension needs for grazing industries.
- RFA recommends that agricultural and environmental agencies, at both Commonwealth and State levels, link together to develop coordinated policy and R&D directions across all land tenures — rabbit management needs a holistic approach to gain the best and lasting outcome.
- RFA considers that the Invasive Animals CRC will provide a forum to link rabbit R&D across jurisdictions and land tenures, and that the CRC should liaise with the national Vertebrate Pests Committee to facilitate this outcome.
- RFA believes that the National Pest Animal Control Strategy, being developed by the Vertebrate Pests Committee, should improve links for improved coordinated rabbit R&D and control across jurisdictions and land tenures — adequate government/industry funding is essential for the Strategy's effective adoption.
- RFA encourages different industry groups and R&D corporations to develop rabbit management strategies in consultation with both producers and conservation land managers.
- RFA believes that improved community understanding of rabbit issues is a fundamental need leading to consistent R&D funding and acceptable control strategies for rabbits.

Background

Foundation for a Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA), formerly the Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation of Australia, was incorporated in 1992 and is a publicly-subscribed fund to:

- Support research and other measures contributing to the eradication of wild rabbit from Australia.
- Raise awareness through the community as to the nature and extent of rabbit induced land and environmental degradation.
- Provide initiatives and support for rabbit control methods based on strategic integrated programs.

The Foundation's Easter Bilby concept, developed during 1991-3, proved to be a highly popular and marketable awareness program resulting in bilby chocolates, a book (jointly published with the Commonwealth's Feral Pest Program) and many other spin-offs. The Foundation has also funded a range of research activities and graduate students with projects related to minimizing the impact of rabbits.

RFA actively promoted the release of the virus causing rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD), formerly known as rabbit calicivirus, and has been concerned for several years that the large agricultural (economic), environmental and social benefits from RHD are being lost through post-RHD complacency amongst governments, land managers, R&D funding agencies and the public — we do not want to see the post-myxomatosis malaise repeated, given the extraordinary tenacity of this pest..

The Foundation is pleased to submit a submission to the SCAFF's inquiry into the impact on agriculture of pest animals, limiting its views to rabbit issues.

National Workshop on Rabbit R&D Directions

RFA's continuing concern with the current rabbit position in Australia resulted in the Foundation, with Australian Wool Innovation involvement, convening a national "Workshop on Rabbit R&D Directions" in Adelaide in May 2005. The Workshop comprised invited delegates many of whom are national leaders in rabbit control, representing research, extension, industry funding corporations and land managers.

RFA's report on the Workshop's proceedings is attached (Attachment 1), together with a copy of a submission to the Australian Wool Innovation Board reporting on the outcomes of the Workshop (Attachment 2). We are very pleased to report that the Australian Wool Innovation Board agreed to the "Proposed next steps" in the submission. This agreement has already resulted in the release of a joint Meat Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation consultancy brief for a strategic review of rabbit research, development and extension (R,D&E) needs for the grazing industries to develop a grazing industry strategy for rabbit management and abatement (Attachment 3). Meat Livestock Australia was independently releasing a brief for rabbits and the meat industry before the Workshop, but the Workshop brought the two funding corporations together, with the expanded brief taking into account the outcomes of the Workshop.

ToR 1: *To identify nationally significant pest animal issues and consider how existing Australian and State government processes can be better linked for more coordinated management of these issues across State boundaries.*

The McLeod report (2004), *Counting the Cost: Impact of Invasive Animals in Australia, 2004*, clearly demonstrates that rabbits are still the number one vertebrate pest causing economic damage — \$113m pa. — even with the low post-RHD numbers of rabbits.

RFA strongly believes that rabbits are also still a major threat to environmental values and that their control requires a holistic approach across all land tenures. It urges the SCAFF inquiry to consider the need for agricultural production and environmental agencies, both at Commonwealth and State levels, to link together to give a more coordinated policy and R&D approach across land tenures in Australia.

The new Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre should be supported to provide a forum to link rabbit and other vertebrate pest R&D across jurisdictions and land tenures. Though, RFA understands that rabbit R&D is a small component of the CRC's business and, while commending the seven year funding cycle for CRCs, recognizes that rabbit R&D needs to be an ongoing commitment to minimise losses caused by rabbits over time. The Invasive Animals CRC should be encouraged to work closely with the national Vertebrate Pests Committee.

The National Pest Animal Control Strategy, currently being developed by the Vertebrate Pests Committee, can assist with improving links on vertebrate pest management across jurisdictions and land tenures. However, RFA stresses the importance of sufficient government and industry funding to implement the Strategy — strategies without on-going financial support can not be effective.

ToR 2: *To consider the approaches to pest animal issues across all relevant jurisdictions, including:*

- ***Reduction of the impact of established pest populations.***

RFA believes that the gradual decline in rabbit R&D effort during the last 20 years (except for the frenzied effort with RHD in the 1990s) seriously threatens the benefits of past successful rabbit R&D and adoption in the field. It also points out that the R&D effort on RHD and its benefits was largely terminated before completion, probably removing the opportunity for maximum benefit from the biological control agent.

During the period, 1950-1970, extensive work was carried out by the States and CSIRO was the preeminent rabbit research agency — there were major advances with 1080 baiting, myxomatosis and, in the rangelands, the myxoma vector, Spanish rabbit flea.

As indicated above, national research effort on rabbits declined rapidly post-RHD. CSIRO has changed its strategic direction and does not include rabbit R&D in any portfolio. State Governments have either greatly reduced the level of rabbit R&D, or threatened rabbit R&D with changes in administrative arrangements favouring overall natural resource management — disciplinary skills in vertebrate pest management may well be lost. There are concerns that the leading vertebrate pest R&D activities of the previous Animal and Plant Control Commission, now in the new South Australian Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation, may be affected by administrative changes to natural resource management. Furthermore, rabbit specialists are decreasing in number and are approaching retirement, with little or no

consideration for succession planning. This situation is a serious threat to successful rabbit control in the future.

The following outcomes of the rabbit workshop suggest approaches that may lead to R&D initiatives and policies to reduce the impact of rabbits nationally:

- **Arid Lands**
 - * Seek new biological controls, disease being the only effective/practical control
 - * Develop and measure strategies for strategic ripping where a complete property ripping campaign is impractical
 - * Develop new applications of existing technologies
 - * Determine the relative impacts of drought, RHD and myxomatosis on rabbit populations
 - * Undertake a cost:benefit analysis of reduced rabbit numbers on wool production following the release of RHD

- **Agricultural Lands**
 - * Develop a shelf-stable RHD bait, determine how to best use it and achieve regulatory approval
 - Maintain existing control techniques – find new ways to apply them
 - Detect and identify any non-pathogenic RHD-like virus to enhance control with RHD
 - Clarify impact of fox and other predator control on rabbit numbers
 - Develop better ripping practices

- **Public Lands**
 - Develop rabbit control methods that do not have an impact on water catchments
 - Determine the economic value to the community of rabbit control for biodiversity conservation
 - Determine the thresholds of abundance at which rabbit control benefits biodiversity, and the potential losses if control is not implemented
 - Develop a code of practice for rabbit welfare
 - Establish and minimise off-target impacts of rabbit control

- **Agricultural and public lands**
 - * Determine the resistance of rabbits to 1080
 - * Develop alternative toxins to 1080
 - * Develop a field antibody test kit to RHD and RHD-like viruses for use with a shelf-stable RHD bait.

- **Primary research needs across all land tenures**
 - * Maintain the effectiveness of RHD and myxomatosis and understand the interactions between them, especially in arid areas where they are the main cost-effective options available.
 - * Review the current knowledge of RHD and its impact on rabbit population dynamics
 - * Gain better understanding of the interactions between conventional control and biocontrol techniques

- * Undertake social research to establish why existing, proven control techniques are not more widely adopted and identify methods to overcome barriers to their adoption
- * Conduct a Research and Review Conference as an aid to further funding decisions
- * Increase research emphasis on achieving biodiversity benefits of rabbit control, especially at low rabbit densities
- * Better cost:benefit analyses of rabbit control options
- * Look nationally and internationally for new pathogens for all land uses, recognising that some options may be site specific
- * Look for weak vulnerable links in rabbit biology/physiology
- Evaluate and address public perceptions/concerns of new control strategies

* Denotes research activities identified as high priority

ToR 3: *Consider the adequacy of State Government expenditure on pest animal control in the context of other conservation and natural resource management priorities, with particular reference to national parks.*

RFA does not have factual information about the adequacy of government expenditure on rabbit control in the context of conservation. We note that there have been some well run control programs (eg Operation Bounceback in SA, Western Shield in WA and Southern Ark in Victoria) but are aware of significant inadequacies elsewhere in conservation lands. We again stress that government environmental agencies should work closely with agricultural agencies to maximise the value of rabbit control for each land use — rabbits know no boundaries.

RFA believes that conservation agencies may well invest more in rabbit control if R&D activity produces information, options and control techniques that can be applied to lands under their control.

ToR 4: *Consider the scope for industry groups and R&D corporations to improve their response to landholder concerns about pest control.*

RFA is delighted with the recent initiative shown by Meat Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation to seek, through a consultancy, the best means for developing a grazing industry strategy for rabbit management and abatement. RFA has offered Australian Wool Innovation assistance to provide a non-partisan view on any directions/recommendations emanating from the consultancy. The Foundation believes that such strategies also require land holders' — pastoralists and agriculturalists — input to guarantee their acceptance and adoption. Industry groups and R&D corporations should also seek the views of conservation land managers on rabbit management to provide a holistic approach to rabbit control across Australia.

The forthcoming National Pest Animal Control Strategy may offer an opportunity to strengthen relationships amongst the various stakeholders with the development of a specific strategy for rabbits, as a pest of national significance (using National Weeds Strategy terminology).

ToR 5: Consider ways to promote community understanding of and involvement in pest animals and their management.

Improving community understanding of and involvement in pest animals and their management is an ongoing challenge that requires resolution. For example, RFA considers that the general belief that RHD has solved the rabbit problem in Australia contributed to a reduction in rabbit R&D funding, control activities and government commitment.

The increased community awareness of animal welfare and concerns with new technology places a further imperative for the community to be exposed to and possibly become involved in informed debate on these issues and the need for rabbit control to ensure that acceptable control strategies are developed.

The communication program and field demonstration sites planned by the Invasive Animals CRC should contribute to an improved community understanding of pest animal issues, including rabbits. Improved monitoring of rabbit density, distribution and impact across Australia and publishing the results in the media would reinforce the importance of rabbits and their control to the community, as well as providing necessary information for future R&D policies.

Community understanding of the importance of pest animals may be heightened with a joint announcement by the Commonwealth Ministers of agriculture and the environment, respectively, of a national pest animal awareness day with appropriate media publicity.

Closing

RFA strongly applauds the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Inquiry and looks forward to the outcomes. We would be pleased to discuss further any issues related to rabbits, if required.

Dr Peter G Allen
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10 July 2005

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