

President's report for 2010/11

I am pleased to submit this report of activities of the Foundation over the last twelve months.

The key question pre-occupying the Main Committee over this period is how the Foundation can attract greater attention from governments, landholders and the broader community about what now appears to be the inevitable return of rabbits to many landscape types over various parts of Australia. This likely situation is emerging despite enormous effort and investment by both the private and public sector for over one hundred years. Yet in spite of this effort, there is still not a lasting solution remotely in sight.

The Foundation's patron, Dr Brian Cooke, has among other things, been working on a review of the literature to estimate the cumulative benefit of myxomatosis and rabbit calicivirus (RHDV) to Australian agriculture. His initial estimates suggest that together, the two biocontrol agents have been worth about \$80 billion (2011 \$ equivalents) over the last 60 years. These are conservative estimates based on wool and meat industries alone. While this figure is not a final one and could change as Dr Cooke's research continues, it gives some idea of the enormous value of the gains so far and the potential for great losses in the future. Such losses will be to industry and to the natural environment, the latter of which difficult to quantify on the same basis.

In the last Foundation newsletter sent to members in August 2011, I made the following statement:

One of the difficulties facing the Foundation is that this is such an entrenched problem that it can easily escape notice of the general community, key decision makers and even some landholders, unless rabbit numbers are in plague proportions. Yet one only has to go and look closely to see that rabbits are back in increasing numbers in parts of Australia. In some coastal and hilly locations, they are doing very well, as is the case in parts of the arid zone where rabbit calicivirus (RHD) may not have gained or re-gained a foothold. The threat to our primary production and our biodiversity continues to build. I believe this is a cause for alarm if we are serious about proper natural resources management.

I see no evidence that suggests to me that I should resile from this statement. For example, in a recent bushwalking trip in the northern part of the Flinders Ranges National Park, I was astonished at the size and extent of rabbit warrens over thousands of hectares of the park. Scores of healthy rabbits were above ground in mid to late afternoon. The Foundation applauds the efforts of the park administrators with the success so far of the "Bounceback" program of feral animal control. However, it may be to little avail without greater investment in on-ground work combined with more effort on more effective biological control options. The Foundation recognises the cost of this effort, but the cost may be more justifiable with an economic assessment of the losses of biodiversity and primary production Australia faces in the next thirty years.

The Foundation has over the last 12 months explored several ways to gain an increased focus on this seemingly intractable problem. We have put a proposal to Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) offering to part fund meetings of the now moribund national Rabbit Management Advisory Group. This group was initially set up by AWI and Meat and Livestock Australia as a forum of landholders and scientists for identifying rabbit control needs and priorities. The Foundation envisaged RMAG as a working group to advise RFA as a 'parent body' and AWI on the most effective means to gain better on-ground control of rabbit numbers. Unfortunately, AWI was not able to partner with RFA, although there appeared to be some interest in investment on the rabbit related projects.

As a way to try and gain greater exposure to the rabbit problem, the Main Committee undertook initial planning earlier in the year to host a national forum in Canberra to raise awareness with politicians, key decision makers and the media. Response from the relevant ministers was not encouraging. After seeking further advice from parliamentary senators, it was clear that the likely outcomes from such a forum would not justify the cost and effort. Further correspondence with ministers has shown an almost complete and quite concerning lack of interest. However, some Opposition senators seem to be prepared to seek a more considered response via the Senate Estimates process.

Following an approach from Dr Bruce Munday, member of the SA Native Vegetation Council about damage from rabbits to revegetation programs funded by the Council, the Foundation has written to the Council presiding member. We are suggesting that the Council consider investing in a project to spearhead further investigation of a possible new biocontrol agent for rabbits, which would be of great value to SA and elsewhere. At the time of writing this report, there has not been a written response, but I am confident that Dr Munday is keen to see that our proposal is considered seriously.

The Foundation has been involved with the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre (IACRC) in part funding the RHD Boost project. This project is exploring how to gain the best results out of RHD, including understanding more about the way it affects rabbits and importantly, if there are other strains of RHD overseas that may be more effective in controlling rabbit populations in Australia. The project is RFA's principal research investment and we look forward to it producing positive results.

RFA is pleased to learn that the IACRC bid for further support funding from the Commonwealth government has reached the final round. We have written a letter of support to the science minister pointing out the serious implications of the Commonwealth having no national organisation with a focus on rabbit control if the IACRC bid fails.

I reported in the last newsletter of the death late last year of RFA's patron Professor Frank Fenner AC. Professor Fenner was a strong supporter of RFA and had had a highly distinguished career spanning more than seventy years. Dr Brian Cooke is now RFA's patron and we are fortunate to have ready access to his wisdom and experience.

I wish to thank our supporters and in particular Haighs Chocolates which has for years provided the backbone of financial support to the Foundation. Haighs products have been 'rabbit free' for well over ten years and sales of Easter Bilby chocolates (along with other Australian native species) continue to grow.

Lastly, I thank the members of the Main Committee, its advisers and our Executive Officer, Mrs Edwina Grant, for their efforts and support over the last year.

For any person who is reading this report and is not a member of RFA, I encourage you to show your support by joining us. Our annual fee is modest and an application form can be found on the RFA website at www.rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au

Nicholas Newland AM

President RFA

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