

Chairman's report to Members

Annual General Meeting – November 14 2019

This is my first report as Chair of Rabbit Free Australia. Since joining RFA in 2016 I have had the pleasure of learning much more about the efforts of this group to:

- support research and those who do the research and extension that contributes to the eradication of rabbits in Australia,
- increase awareness and understanding of the nature and extent of degradation caused by rabbits and
- encourage other integrated control programs that contribute to the eradication of rabbits.

These aims are set out in our web site (<http://www.rabbitfreeaustralia.com.au/>) and I encourage all members to revisit the site for a refresher and to actively promote it to others.

Well prior to joining RFA, my research into vegetation water use and the productivity and conservation of Australian landscapes led me to the strong view that the single largest environmental effect on the Australian landscape has been uncontrolled grazing. And regretfully, also poorly managed grazing in too many cases. Reducing vegetation cover and exposing the ground surface is the largest causative influence of erosion. Changing vegetation cover, changes everything in landscape processes, water, soils, weathering and all biology. The rapid and irreversible changes European colonisation has wrought on the Australian landscape have included many unintended detrimental effects, such as that from destructive rabbits. Our doing, our problem, our responsibility - hence RFA.

In compiling this report I have read the Chairs reports from the last five years (all available on our web site). Some recurring threads are apparent and worth commenting on. The course of the introduction of a second RHD virus, K5 makes interesting reading. This was developed and released through the Invasive Animal CRC in 2016. The coincident natural occurrence of RHD V2 prior to the release of K5, its subsequent spread and the sporadic monitoring of both viruses has caused our Committee to express concern at the lack of a comprehensive follow up. RFA support for research projects such as the discovery that flies are a major vector of RHD viruses and subsequent monitoring of virus occurrence in flies as a means of tracking distribution have been satisfying. So to have other projects using DNA analysis to identify genetic lineage of the multiple introduction of wild rabbits into Australia. It is worth highlighting that rabbit population monitoring at Turretfield has compiled the most comprehensive record in Australia. Such monitoring has enabled analysis that shows that the combination of myxomatosis and RHD viruses has synergistic effects that have reduced the resident rabbit population to the lowest ever recorded. The RFA Committee hope to be able to increase support for well described and supervised research projects through our current targeted call for proposals. However we remain concerned that Federal and State Government support for research and monitoring of biological control continues to be halting at best, dismissive at worst.

In relation to raising awareness of the extent of degradation caused by rabbits it is pleasing to note that Dr Bruce Munday's book "Those Wild Rabbits" that was flagged in 2015 and published in 2017 has now been reprinted with sales of more than 2,500 copies. Central to our awareness raising is the ongoing support from and relationship with Haigh's Easter Bilby campaign. Reminding Australians that the loss of native species through displacement and competition from introduced rabbits is an ongoing need.

As our Treasurer William Morgan will report, our financial position remains modest but healthy. During this last year two supported project reported back. All others that we had been supporting were essentially completed at the end of 2018. The work by Dr Adam Croxford followed up on the use of flies to track RHD viruses, particularly RHDV2 using next-generation DNA sequencing and quantitative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) techniques. Fly samples were collected from many sites around Australia and the various analysis methods developed. The research showed that the presence of RHDV2 could be successfully identified, as could RHDK5 and two other closely related viruses. These viruses were associated with four fly species. More work is needed to refine the methods and its widespread application. Work by Amy Iannella on the occurrence of RHD virus resistance genes among the various introduced lineages has so far indicated that there is no obvious or strong differences between them. Presumably this means that no rabbit population in Australia is more susceptible nor more resistant to the current RHD viruses than any other.

During the coming year the Committee hope to provide support to several worthy research projects resulting from the current, Australia wide call. We are in discussion to set up a couple of working sub committees to both spread the load and to tap the experience and knowledge of a wider range of interested people. I would also like to re-invigorate our engagement with conservation groups, particularly the NGO's. It is instructive that our invitation to this meeting to the SA Minister for the Environment and Water was deflected to the SA Minister for Agriculture. I take this as an indication that the effect of invasive rabbits is considered only in terms of productive loss rather than a whole of environment and natural resources issue.

In common with all previous Chair's reports there is need to acknowledge and thank many people for their generous support. The on-going support from Haigh's Chocolates is of fundamental value to our Foundation. The significant donations from Tasmanian landowner Henry Foster, from Mutooroo Pastoral Company and smaller donations from many others, the support of our committed members and members of the RFA Committee are all gratefully acknowledged. We are thankful to Adelaide Zoo for fee free use of this meeting room and also to Primary Producers SA for use of their facilities for our quarterly meetings. The vital role that our honorary Treasurer, William Morgan plays is critical to our endeavours and we thank him for his service.

As required by our Rules of Association (available on our web site) two of our Committee members, Peter Dunn and Peter Day will be retiring from our Committee. A third Committee member, Peter Alexander submitted his resignation earlier in the year. All three members have made a tremendous contribution to RFA and all members thank them for their generous time and experience commitment. We are very fortunate that Dr Bruce Munday has agreed to re-join the committee after a stint as an advisor. There are therefore two Committee vacancies that we would really like to fill. Finally, Edwina Grant, our Executive Officer has indicated that she will finish up at the end of this year. She has contributed substantially to the success of RFA. All members join me in thanking her for her commitment and good grace and we wish her every happiness in her future time without the day to day operations of the RFA.

Adj. Prof. Wayne Meyer.
November 14th, 2019