

# Chairman's Annual Report – 2020-21

## Introduction

The Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia is an environmental charity with three mission objectives:

- Support research and researchers,
- raise awareness and understanding, and
- encourage on-ground control measures.

All three contribute to our ultimate objective - to eradicate wild rabbits from Australia. The European wild rabbit is Australia's worst vertebrate pest, being widespread and destructive to natural environments and primary production. Rabbits adversely affect over 300 threatened native species, change landscapes, and cause losses of over \$200 million a year to agricultural production.

Rabbit-Free Australia is committed to rebuilding productive and regenerating landscapes, free of their most notorious vertebrate pest (the European wild rabbit).

## Research

Any success at controlling wild rabbits in Australia has resulted from focussed and persistent research. The need for continuing, directed research comes from the reality that none of the current controls will, on their own, eliminate wild rabbits. Biological controls (myxo, RHDV) can significantly reduce the rabbit population, but in time, these controls become less effective. The search for variations in existing viruses or the discovery of new bio-controls remains vital to buy time until more innovative techniques prove successful.

A possible new technique is the deliberate introduction of limiting genes into an animal population, commonly called Gene-Drive technology. The Foundation has provided support for Dr Stephen Frankenberg of the University of Melbourne, to see if it is possible to modify a specific gene (e.g. one related to fertility) in a way that is self-propagating, thus becoming predominant throughout the population. If successful, this method could drive the population to extinction. As you would appreciate such a challenging technique will have many ethical and social questions to work through before it is applied. While the Foundation's financial contribution is modest, Dr Frankenberg has assured us that it was catalytic in winning more substantive funding from the Federal Government.

The Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) in Canberra also has an active program on Gene Drive technology, aiming to demonstrate the technical feasibility of genetic bio-control technology for rabbits.

During the last year the Foundation has become an Associate Member of CISS. We are now actively involved in the interesting and complex discussions on shaping the "Integrated Rabbit Biocontrol Program" of the Centre. The program for the next five years aims the following key outputs:

1. Optimised use of existing biocontrol tools.
2. Development of complementary rabbit control techniques, including more effective bio-control application techniques.
3. National Coordination of on-ground management action at the regional level across Australia – mainly through a "National Feral Rabbit Management Coordinator".
4. New diagnostic and monitoring tools and their application.

It is an ambitious agenda that needs to satisfy numerous diverse funders. In discussions about their strategy we have reinforced the need to strengthen national coordination of rabbit control and for suitable control measures for sensitive areas (e.g. natural vegetation and urban settings).

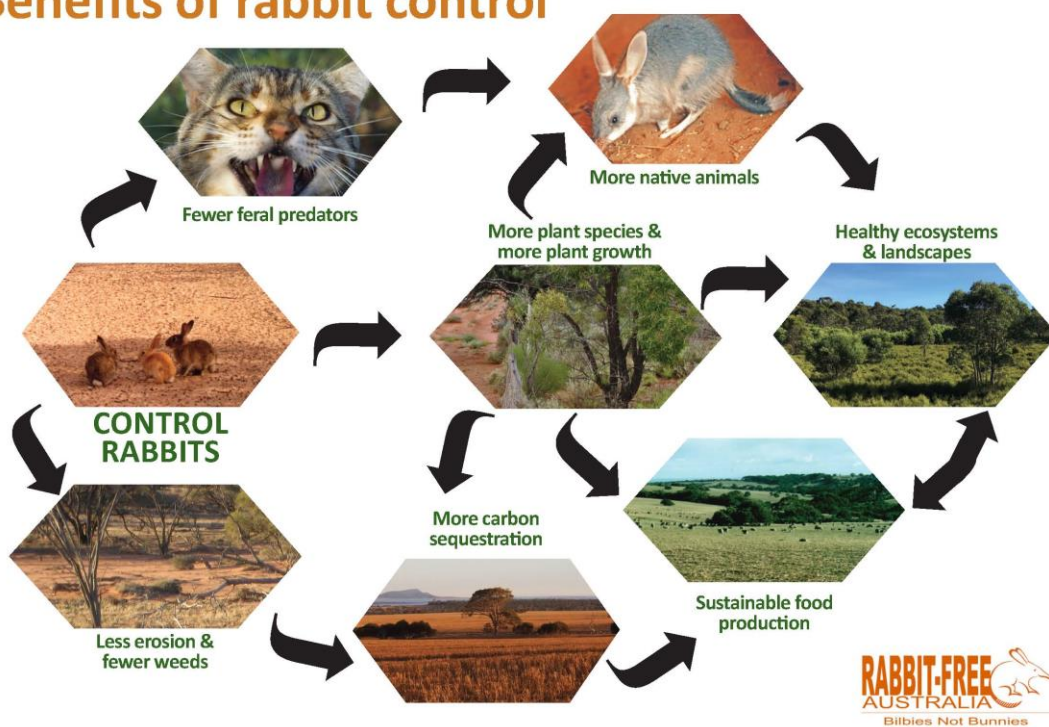
We have also promoted the need for more effective training and deployment of existing controls, and for an integrated approach to pest control; and we are pleased to now be jointly sponsoring a project with CISS to embed 'integration' into their Glovebox Guides for pest control.

Following a call for project proposals in early 2021 we have provided support to.

- Neil Ross (UNSW) for travel expenses (\$12,225) for field work to investigate rabbit impacts on ground layer vegetation. It was noted that field work is imperative but is getting more difficult in universities - this funding would be a catalyst for it.
- Katherine Moseby (UNSW), \$19,000 to compare the impacts of heatwaves on rabbits and other burrowing animals. The study at the Arid Recovery Reserve north of Roxby Downs has an enclosed area where rabbits and bilbies co-habit. Animals will be fitted with tracking collars to follow their behaviour during heat-waves in the study period, potentially giving us more insight into how climate change may affect rabbits and bilbies.

The Foundation committee, with assistance from Patron Brian Cooke and Amy Iannella, have reviewed and updated our Prospectus to encourage a wider range of potential projects to be submitted for funding in 2022. It is my pleasure to launch the 2022 Prospectus and call for project proposals. Specific suggestions for targeting particular researchers and or projects are welcome.

## Benefits of rabbit control



## Awareness

The need to continuously raise awareness and increase understanding is twofold.

First is the critical need to ensure that all land stewards (governments, owners and land users) appreciate that wild rabbits are still present and as destructive as ever. At best, we have partial control of this insidious invader and, thanks to the fantastic success of myxo, rabbit fleas and RHDV, numbers are massively less than they threatened to be.

However this success has spawned complacency – “yes, there are a few, but they’re not a problem!” Well actually they are. A few can very rapidly become a lot, especially as the effectiveness of the current bio-controls inevitably declines, and 1 rabbit per 2 hectares is enough to stop the recruitment of palatable vegetation.

Second, we need to promote Rabbit-Free Australia as a focussed organisation that can encourage and catalyse research and its applications to eliminate wild rabbits. To that end we are engaging in a ‘national conversation’ about rabbits with a wide range of organisations and individuals. Early in the ‘conversation’ it became apparent that organisations appreciate input to their conferences. Carolyn Ireland subsequently presented to the NRM in the Rangelands conference and more are planned. Unfortunately, Carol’s had to be a virtual presentation and she must be commended for mastering the skills to produce a video presentation for that purpose.

Another outcome from early consultation is to engage with CISS to plan a joint Rabbit R&D Update. We hope this occurs early next year as an on-line event.

Raising the awareness of the need for rabbit control is ongoing. It is reassuring to see that CISS has maintained a specific program of research and its application of rabbit control. This engagement at Federal Government level should not be taken for granted since this is a very crowded and competitive space. Invasive species and biosecurity threats are numerous, hence having a consistent and credible presence is important to maintaining political and hence organisational support.

It has also been extremely rewarding to see a collaboration between three Foundation members - Graeme Finlayson (Bush Heritage Australia), Pat Taggart (NSW DPI and CISS) and our Patron Brian Cooke (Uni of Canberra) - bear fruit in a very substantive way. Their paper “Recovering Australia’s arid-zone ecosystems: learning from continental-scale rabbit control experiments” published in *Restoration Ecology* has triggered an article in *The Conversation*, publicity by CISS and ourselves including social and on-line media, and traditional media interviews. Their readable and authoritative material is just what is needed to promote our case, and the Foundation was pleased to help ensure it is readily available to all.

I remain keen to improve our engagement with national conservation groups. Having Graeme Finlayson from Bush Heritage Australia on our committee has strengthened our awareness of the practical issues of rabbit control in properties managed for conservation. We have also had ongoing interaction with other private land conservation Trusts and NRM Regions Australia. Part of these interactions has been to explore the possibility of expanding the influence of our Easter Bilby trademark to increase awareness that rabbit control is critical for success in native revegetation and the re-introduction of native animals.

## On-ground Action

As noted in my report last year the Foundation is neither constituted nor equipped to do research or provide on-ground rabbit control advice or service. However, I am keen to see that the Foundation becomes a go-to organisation for quality information on rabbit control. As foreshadowed last year, a primary method to achieve this will be revamping of our web presence.

This has already involved engaging a new site provider, updating software, and reforming the content and its presentation. Executive Officer Peter, along with Committee Member Amy Iannella, and contract programmer Amy Cotton, with help from associates (including Brian Cooke, Graeme Finlayson, Kaye Kessing, Emilie Roy-Dufresne, Kat Ng and Miles Knightly) have done a mountain of work to update ‘About Rabbits’ and the ‘Members Lounge’; including a couple of informative blogs from Brian and a Forum for discussion. It is helping position the Foundation as a primary resource, and a review of the ‘Control’ pages will enhance that next year.

## Operations

### Members

The modernisation of our membership renewal and recording processes required considerable work by our Executive and Administrative Officers (Peter and Vicki) with technical leadership from Amy Iannella. Having membership administration automated lets us improve our interactions with members and reduces the administrative load. If we can grow our membership from the current base of 66 it will not add significantly to administration costs. We hope our new logo helps promote the ideals of the Foundation and make it more recognisable to potential members.

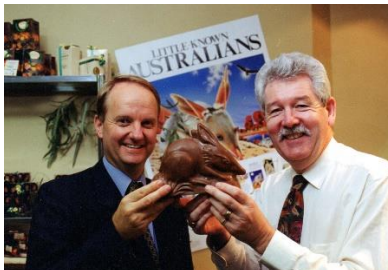
### Committee

The Foundation committee has met four times during the past year, all by electronic conferencing. While this has been efficient and necessary it does limit the personal interactions that comes with face-to-face meetings. I suspect that we will continue with the conferencing, especially if we are able to attract interstate committee members. However, we will endeavour to have at least one face-to-face meeting each year.

The upcoming AGM marks the final meeting as Committee members for Deane Crabb and Bruce Munday, both of whom have given outstanding service for many years. I thank them both and wish them well. They will be hard to replace but we are exploring some options for the future.

The Committee has also enjoyed the contributions from volunteers such as Anne Burgi who has helped with sub-editing publications and design advice, Chris Bourke for her weekly 'post-mistress' duties, and our valued, long-serving Auditor Neil Wallace of 'Wallace Vroulis Bond'. Zoos SA have also once again been very generous in making Santos Conservation Centre available for our AGM.

With assistance from Nicholas Newland, we have catalogued many archived photos this year.



Alister Haigh & Ed McAlister



Numerous associates



William Morgan

### Administration

The Foundation's administrators i.e. Peter and Vicki Day, have been very active during the year. I want to acknowledge the fabulous work that they have contributed. The updated web site, the greatly improved membership contact and renewal system, and rationalising banking and financial arrangements has made the Foundation a more professional organisation. We sincerely thank Peter and Vicki for their enormous contribution. It is also important to acknowledge the input and guidance from our Treasurer, William Morgan. I have come to admire and appreciate William's involvement with the Foundation – he continues to provide financial guidance plus detail on the origins and history of the Foundation.

### Conclusion

It is my happy duty to report that the Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia is in a financially and administratively sound position. The Foundation is now poised to significantly raise its profile and to exert its influence to fulfil its purpose - to control and ultimately eliminate destructive wild rabbits from Australian landscapes.