

Policy Platform 2022. Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia.

Our Purpose

The primary aim of Rabbit-Free Australia is to promote research into the effective control of Australia's most notorious vertebrate pest, the European wild rabbit.

Rabbits are a risk to over 300 threatened plants and animals and still cost cropping and grazing industries over \$200 million per year. But their impact goes well beyond that, changing entire ecosystems, degrading landscapes, and affecting the wellbeing of landholders from city fringes to central Australia. See 'The Rabbit Problem' for more information.

The Foundation seeks to raise awareness of the harm rabbits cause and the latent risks they pose, to foster research into rabbit control, and to encourage the adoption of science-based solutions for rabbit control. For more information see '*About Rabbit-Free Australia*' and '*The first 30 years of Rabbit-Free Australia*'.

This document presents policy positions regarding Research and Innovation, National Action, and Resilience and Recovery.

Research and Innovation

The specifics of rabbit control vary by region and landuse, but the fundamentals are universal. Rabbit-Free Australia therefore encourages research programs of national collaboration to optimise outcomes from scarce research resources and to meet the breadth of needs from land managers across Australia. The Centre for Invasive Species Solutions, of which the Foundation is an Associate Member, provides an effective means to plan and drive a necessary program of national research.

Effective research programs are carefully designed to ensure the worth of the integrated parts is far greater than the sum of the individual components. Projects are designed strategically to link and feed into each other, to cover short and long term needs, and to range from heavily applied to 'blue sky' or 'cutting edge' in nature.

Recent government investment decisions have moved away from backing collaborative programs to supporting selected individual projects, as of June 30, 2022. The approach threatens the continuity of research programs, undermines instead of building research capability, and results in individual projects underperforming due to the lack of critical links because related projects weren't funded. It favours short-term outcomes over long term projects, which are often prerequisites for other work.

Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia urges the funding of the CISS Rabbit Biocontrol Research and Innovation Plan as a whole, including monitoring, by the Australian and supportive State Governments.

National Action

For many pests of national significance, a National Coordinator drives the development of a National Action Plan and coordinates strategic initiatives for pest control. The National Wild Dog Action Plan and its coordinator is the longest serving of these and provides an example of what can be achieved. National Action Plans, supported by national management coordinators, exist for Feral Deer and Feral Pigs, while a national coordinator provides an overview for strategic feral cat and fox control.

There is no such national plan for rabbits and control actions across the country are consequently diverse, un-even, and often belatedly arise as a response to an emergency.

The existing national pest management coordinators communicate regularly and collaborate when practical, but rabbits are missing from their initiatives. Given the interconnected relationships between pests and weeds, and their ability to spread across landscapes, it is important to promote an integrated approach to pest control. A 'rabbits voice' is currently missing from the table when such matters are discussed.

As an example of beneficial integration, in addition to degrading vegetation rabbits also sustain feral cats and foxes, driving hyper-predation of native animals. Rabbit control should be a first step in feral cat control. For more information on the web of impacts caused by rabbits see *'The Rabbit Problem'*.

Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia urges funding and support for the development of a National Action Plan for rabbits and the appointment of a national rabbit management coordinator. The Foundation would be keen to collaborate closely with the coordinator and the development of a National Rabbit Action Plan – and to ensure that, wherever feasible, an integrated approach is promoted for pest control.

Resilience and Recovery

Severe adverse events – droughts, bushfires, and floods - are a feature of Australian landscapes. Many climate models predict they will get worse due to climate change. Those events can be significant to the survival and spread of feral animals, rabbits included.

One of the 'success factors' of rabbits is their ability to rapidly recover following devastation by drought, fire or flood. Their renowned breeding ability means they get a head-start on other recovering species and quickly exert undue grazing pressure on resurgent vegetation. Their selective grazing will eliminate regenerating seedlings of palatable species, changing the structure and function of plant communities. They quickly radiate from refuge areas and re-open old warrens as they reclaim their former territory. Natural disasters can work in favour of rabbits.

However, rabbits are also vulnerable at such times. Their numbers will be low and they may be concentrated into refuge areas. Rabbit control at such times will:

- take advantage of the lower, more concentrated, populations, and
- slow the rate of rabbit recovery post-drought or fire and reduce the number of nodes from which populations radiate; enabling better ecosystem and landscape recovery.

To be effective in the long-term, control actions should target warrens and any other harbour that enables breeding. Destroying abandoned warrens as well as those in current use will reduce the risk of rabbit recovery at a later date. Just as preventing seed-set is a key to weed control, preventing breeding is a key to long-term rabbit control.

The strategic value of rabbit control at times of drought and other exceptional climate-driven circumstances is similar for other vertebrate pests as well. As examples:

- Feral deer move into recently burnt areas and eat the new, recovering epicormic growth and understory. As the bush recovers, the deer don't leave, resulting in a new deer population.
- Feral pigs will concentrate around waters during drought, fouling them and dominating access. Being mobile they radiate back out from their refuges once drought breaks.
- Feral predators can be vulnerable during drought as they concentrate around waters, and their control after bushfire gives native prey a better chance of recovery.

Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia urges governments to develop proactive programs that support the control of rabbits and other feral animals when they are vulnerable at times of exceptional climate events. Doing so will improve the resilience of landscapes and promote recovery – for the land and the people charged with its management. Strategic pest control should be a significant part of drought, bushfire, and drought recovery programs at all levels of government.

Rabbit-Free Australia is collaborating with other bodies to develop options for the delivery of this policy initiative incorporating strategic pest control into disaster recovery and climate resilience programs. Early support and involvement from governments and government agencies would be warmly welcomed and would help align initiatives with government priorities. See *'Rabbit Control in times of Natural Disaster'*, as an example for rabbits.

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