

The first 30 years of Rabbit-Free Australia



Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia Inc (RFA) was originally established as the Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation of Australia (ARRFA).

It originated from a late-1990 meeting in Port Augusta where a local pastoralist, Keith Greenfield (of Billa Kalina Station), suggested that a national fund be formed to support research into the rabbit problem.

That idea was further developed by Nicholas Newland (then with the Department of Environment) with support from David Moyle (Nature Conservation Society of SA) and Peter Day (SA Farmers Federation).

An inaugural committee (chaired by Ed McAlister, Director of the Adelaide Zoo) was formed in 1991 to advance the concept. A public meeting (emceed by ABC rural journalist Ian Doyle) was held in February 1992 and the Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation of Australia was incorporated in July 1992. At that time, its primary aim was to develop and administer a publicly subscribed national fund to:

- Support research and other measures contributing to the eradication of the 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.



Rabbit researcher and long-term Foundation supporter, Greg Mutze, addresses an early forum.

Why rabbits are a major pest in Australia

“If you see rabbits then they are already present in numbers sufficient to cause environmental harm.”

The European wild rabbit is Australia’s worst vertebrate pest. Rabbits adversely affect more than 300 threatened native species, change landscapes, and cause agricultural production losses of more than \$200 million a year.

Rabbits can breed quickly and damage crops, pastures and plantings, undermine infrastructure and invite weeds and erosion. At very low numbers (one per 0.5 ha), their selective grazing can prevent the recruitment of whole generations of palatable plant species, and severely impair revegetation efforts and the establishment of commercial plantings. In high numbers, their grazing pressure and warren construction can devastate crops, pastures and native vegetation.

A national ‘threat abatement plan’ has been developed for rabbits because they:

- Compete with livestock and with native wildlife for food and shelter.
- Selectively graze preferred plant species – stopping regeneration and putting the local survival of whole species (and any animals reliant upon them) at risk. *The mere presence of rabbits can threaten the survival of entire species of plants and animals.*

- Reduce vegetation cover and the protection available for small native animals that are susceptible to introduced predators like feral cats and foxes, and increases the risk of soil erosion and invasion by weeds.
- Support pest predators like feral cats and foxes. As food they sustain predator numbers, which increases the threat to small native animals like bilbies. Rabbit warrens enable feral cats and foxes to survive the extreme summer temperatures of inland Australia.



Laying foundations

In 1992, Western Mining Corporation (WMC) contributed \$150,000 over three years as seed funding and the Feral Pest Program of the Australian Nature Conservation Agency (ANCA) provided \$30,000 to employ a part-time executive officer. Western Mining contributed another \$150,000 over three years from 1995. Elders came on-board in 1993 by providing free office accommodation.

In early 1993, the Foundation organised a highly successful national conference on rabbits. The Conference was opened by the Patron of ARRFA, The Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, The Honourable Bill Hayden.

The inaugural Executive Officer, William Morgan, was appointed in 1993 to establish the tax-deductible fund, to commence administration of the fund, and to develop the Easter Bilby concept; including registering a trademark and liaison with chocolate manufacturers, such as long-term collaborators Haigh's Chocolates.

William was supported by voluntary minutes secretary Moira Proud, and Kevin Heinrich who looked after the research side of operations. Richard Fewster and Rick Sautter helped with public relations and media advice, while Brian Cooke (and later Greg Mutze) provided technical advice. Nicholas Newland and Peter Day remained involved, assisting as required.

Foundation stalwart, Nicholas Newland, at Koonamore reserve.



William Morgan, inaugural Executive Officer and subsequent Treasurer, assisting calicivirus researchers on Wardang Island.



Easter Bilby

Haigh's Chocolates launched its first Easter Bilby in 1993, under a licence from ARRFA. However, the Foundation's Easter Bilby trademark was contested by members of the Confectionery Manufacturers of Australia. Following considerable legal effort, the dispute was settled by an agreement in 1997 in which the Foundation's right to the 'Easter Bilby' trademark was acknowledged and opposition to it withdrawn.



The 'Easter Bilby' children's book (by Ali Garnett and Kaye Kessing) was published in 1994 and an associated educational Easter Bilby Action Pack in 1995, with assistance from ANCA's Endangered Species and Feral Pests programs. It was followed up by 'Easter Bilby's Secret' (by Kaye Kessing and Ali Garnett) in 1999. An Easter Bilby pantomime was also developed and performed in NSW and Victoria (at the Melbourne Zoo) with support from ANCA.

In 2021, the Foundation developed the idea of introducing the Easter Bilby's Friends in a new series of children's books, and is currently exploring options to achieve that.



Alister Haigh (Haigh's Chocolates) and Ed McAlister (inaugural Chair), launching Haigh's Easter Bilby.

Ali Garnett (co-author of 'Easter Bilby' with Kaye Kessing) helping with pantomime preparations.



National support

Branches of the Foundation were established in the Northern Territory (by Bernie Kilgariff in 1993), New South Wales (by David Lord in 1995), Queensland and Victoria. They were a great boost to rabbit management and the Foundation's aims but ultimately were not sustainable with the limited resources available.

The Foundation now pursues a whole-of-nation perspective from its Adelaide base, with a presence across Australia through its input to research projects, various national programs and networks.

Rotary clubs across Australia were also committed to rabbit control through their Australian Campaign for Rabbit Eradication (ACRE) and had strong links with the Foundation from its early days. ACRE was represented on the Foundation's Committee by Barry Barrett, Bill Hall and then Don Sarah. The ACRE program included an annual award for on-ground rabbit control.

RHD in Australia

The Foundation provided considerable in-kind support to the trials of RHD (rabbit calicivirus) on Wardang Island in 1995. Foundation stalwart, Nicholas Newland, was the national RHD Program Coordinator and Executive Officer, William Morgan, stepped up when Nicholas was on leave. William and Dave Bartel also provided voluntary service as pilots of the small planes used to access the Island.

Rob Morrison became Chair of the Foundation late in 1995, just prior to the detection of RHD on the mainland. His experience with media, as a TV science reporter, was tested frequently in the months to follow with the Foundation being a leading voice in national discussions following the rapid spread of the virus across Australia.

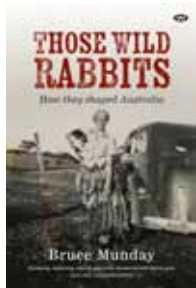
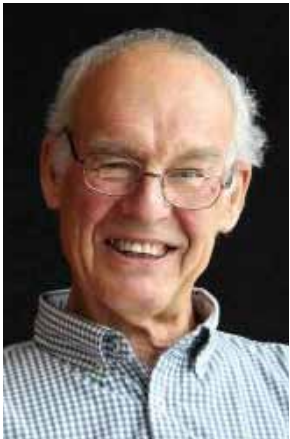
Going Rabbit-Free

The name of the Foundation was changed from Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation of Australia to Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia in 1998, to overcome the misleading connotations of being anti-research, that were conjured by the original name.

Strategic leadership in science

Although small in terms of resources, Rabbit-Free Australia has been influential in rabbit research and development, due largely to the support of volunteers and its sharp focus on European wild rabbits. An early example was facilitating on-going breeding programs for Spanish rabbit fleas in Queensland, NSW and SA following their successful release in 1993.

The spread of RHD in Australia had a huge beneficial impact for the environment and primary producers, and led to complacency about rabbit control. Concerned that rabbit control was



Committee Member Bruce Munday authored 'Those Wild Rabbits'.

Vicki Linton and Paul Dalby with Foundation advisers Brian Cooke and Peter Day, at an early Foundation forum.



David Peacock (Ranger, and subsequent rabbit researcher) and Rob Morrison (Foundation Chair), inspecting a palatable bullock bush seedling emerging in a disused warren following the arrival of RHDV.



mistakenly being taken for granted the Foundation convened a National Workshop in 2005, with strong support from Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA). That led to the development of a 'Grazing industry strategy for rabbit management and abatement' through AWI and MLA, and subsequently their joint investment of \$1.5 million over three years. A national Rabbit Management Advisory Group (RMAG) was established, with the Foundation playing a significant role. In 2021 the Foundation became an Associate Member of CISS and collaborated to investigate how rabbit control managers across Australia could gain easy access to the latest research and rabbit control information. The first of what is hoped to be a series of joint online Rabbit R&D Updates was held in 2022. The Foundation invested in a diverse range of projects over the years, from ground penetrating radar to map warrens to generate technology; due largely to generous donors including the Foster, Morgan (Mutooroo Pastoral Company) and MacLachlan (Jumbuck) families.

Public awareness

The Foundation's primary focus is research, but to ensure there is funding for the science, there has to be public awareness of the harm caused by rabbits and the need to continually develop new forms of controls. Easter Bilby leads the charge in that regard and, although what were annual celebrations involving Haigh's Chocolates, Adelaide Zoo and the Foundation have matured to decadal birthday celebrations, the annual promotion of Easter Bilby continues through social and mainstream media. The Rabbit-Free Australia website also regularly posts relevant stories and shares them on social media.

In 2009, the Foundation was a partner with Pest Animals CRC (now CISS) and ABC radio in a national program, 'Rabbiting on', in which people across the nation were invited to share their rabbit stories. Programs like that help people remember the problems caused by rabbits and serve an educational purpose for the generations of land managers who have never experienced rabbit

Patrons: The Honourable Bill Hayden, William Deane (AC), Dr Frank Fenner (AC), Adj Prof Brian Cooke (OAM)

Foundation Chairs: Dr Ed McAlister (AO), Dr Rob Morrison (OAM), Nicholas Newland (AM), Dr Peter Allen (AM), Tim Rogers, Dr John Radcliffe (AM), Peter Alexander, Prof. Wayne Meyer.

Foundation Executive Officers: William Morgan, 'Fred' Bartholomeus, Keryn Lapidge, Edwina Grant, Peter Day.

plagues and the devastation that follows. With that in mind, the Foundation sponsored Bruce Munday to record the history of rabbits in Australia in his book, 'Those wild rabbits. How they shaped Australia', which was released in 2017.

A national conversation

Much of the harm caused by rabbits can go un-noticed in the environment until it is too late and, in post-calici landscapes, many land managers under appreciate the risk that rabbits still pose. None-the-less seasonal outbreaks of rabbits still cause great concern in many areas (including in peri-urban and other sensitive environments) and many people also understand that the threats of fading virulence in bio-controls and increased resistance by rabbits will never disappear. The dichotomy of views is partly due to the diversity of people, regions and agencies involved.

In 2021, Rabbit-Free Australia initiated a national conversation to address that. It is talking to people and organisations across Australia to better understand the challenges they face, the successes they enjoy, and any gaps which the Foundation may help fill. The discussion will be rolled out over several years and any needs identified addressed as soon as possible - the Rabbit R&D Updates are an example of that, as was a review of the Glovebox Guides with CISS to better promote integrated pest control programs.

In support of the national conversation, an online membership system was adopted in 2021 and a Members Lounge created on the website with a Forum for discussions amongst members. Committee member Amy Iannella and web-manager Amy Cotton played big roles in both.



Amy Iannella was assisted in her PhD research by the Foundation, prior to serving on the Committee.

More information about Rabbit-Free Australia

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Bilbies Not Bunnies