



Photo: CSIRO

# Controlling rabbits on a small property

## Rabbit impacts

Rabbits are the biggest environmental vandals in Australia, implicated in the decline of over 300 threatened native species. They also cause serious property and environmental damage, including contributing to soil erosion.

There are a range of techniques available to manage rabbits, however options for control can be limited if you're on a small property. This paper aims to give an overview of some of the techniques available for small landholders on the south coast of Western Australia.

Rabbit control techniques fall into two categories, destroying their habitat and destroying the rabbits themselves.

## Destroy habitat

It is important to destroy any habitat that might harbour rabbits on your property. Rabbits don't always use warrens as shelter, they can also shelter in and amongst vegetation. Therefore controlling invasive plant species can help to reduce rabbit habitat. Remember, it is illegal to destroy native vegetation without the necessary approvals.

Destruction of warrens can be more difficult on a small holding. If possible, best practice involves using machinery. Pest Smart's Standard Operating Procedure RAB006: Rabbit warren destruction by ripping provides more information on ripping techniques. Ripping is most effective when rabbit numbers are already low. The aim of ripping is to destroy habitat, not rabbits.

## Is ripping right?

Are the rabbits sheltering in warrens?

Are you able to access the area with machinery safely?

Is the risk of soil erosion limited?

If you answer yes to these questions, then ripping may need to be a part of your control methods. If you are working on a small property, it might be more cost effective to band with your neighbours and engage a contractor to undertake the ripping on a number of close properties at the same time. This type of coordinated control also helps to contribute to a coordinated landscape scale control – reducing the risk of reestablishment.

Interestingly, rabbits do not readily dig new warrens, rabbit populations do not persist in areas where warrens are effectively destroyed and re-colonisation is therefore less likely (Pest Smart).

## Destroy rabbits

There are two key things to remember when controlling rabbits.

1. All control activities must comply with requirements under the Animal Welfare Act 2002 and Animal Welfare (General) Regulations 2003 so that animals are handled and killed humanely.
2. It is an offence to release any declared pest, including rabbits, back into the wild.

## Virus

Release of the rabbit calici virus (RDHV1-K5) is a good control option. The virus only impacts rabbits, so it will not affect pets, humans or other wildlife.

To be able to release the virus in Western Australia you need to be an authorised user, which requires completion of on-line training available through

the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development's Client Online Training website (<https://regtraining.dpird.wa.gov.au/externaluser/login/index.php>). The virus works best if it's part of a coordinated, landscape scale approach as it is only 40% effective. So it is worth contacting your local recognised biosecurity group to see if they are planning on carrying out a release in your area.

It is unlikely that you will find large numbers of dead rabbits on your property following the release of the virus as infected rabbits will return to their burrow to die. If you do find a dead rabbit, it is best to bury or dispose of it to avoid attracting other species.

## Shooting

Whilst shooting rabbits can be humane, the risks of shooting on a small property can be far too great. The National Firearms Safety Code sets out the effective danger range for projectiles from different guns as follows:

- 22 rimfire = 1500 metres (1.5 kilometres)
- 303 = 3600 metres (3.6 kilometres)
- 308 = 4050 metres 4.0 Kilometres
- Air rifle = 150 metres
- Shotgun # 6 shot = 250 metres
- BB shot = 450 metres

## Trapping

Trapping can be an effective method for controlling rabbits if numbers are small. Bait the traps with items such as diced carrot, apple and oats to lure rabbits in. Remember, any rabbits caught in the trap need to be killed humanely. Some councils or community landcare groups may have traps available for loan or hire.



## Baiting/poisons

Before starting a baiting program, a risk assessment should be carried out to minimise impacts on other animals. This involves looking at what species, including native animals, you have present on your property and determining what impact your baiting program might have on them.

1080 cannot be used in urban areas due to the risk to livestock and pets. In these cases, pindone is the recommended poison, but can only be used on properties larger than 1000m<sup>2</sup> in Western Australia.

Rabbits need to be encouraged to feed on the

bait by free-feeding with unpoisoned oats before poison-baiting can commence. Free-feeding should continue until the rabbits are feeding consistently; this will usually take two to three nights. Once rabbits are feeding well on the unpoisoned oats remove all remaining grain and apply the poisoned oats. Ready-to-use pindone bait is available through farm supply stores.

Baiting is recommended during late summer/early autumn when alternative feed is scarce and rabbits are under stress. Following a baiting program, any dead rabbits and uneaten bait should be disposed of either through burial or other safe means.

1080	Pindone
S7 Poison: Baiting application, risk assessment and authorisation voucher procedure required.	S6 Poison: can be purchased 'off the shelf'.
Acute poison, toxic to target species at low concentrations.	Chronic poison, needs multiple feeds.
Natural plant product. These plants occur naturally in WA, although synthetic product is made for pest control.	Synthetic product.
Due to safety concerns, can not be used in built-up/urban areas.	Can be used in built-up/urban areas.
Poison and pre-feed laid in the same trail.	Requires pre-feeding for around 3 nights prior to poison-baiting.
Water soluble so can not be used in wet conditions.	Water soluble so can not be used in wet conditions.
Highly target specific. No demonstrated impact on native animals at the population level.	Less selective in action. Known to cause the deaths of kangaroos and bandicoots, and is toxic to a number of birds (e.g. parrots, eagles) and domestic animals (e.g. sheep, horses, cattle).
No effective antidote.	Antidote known (Vitamin K).
Need to prevent domestic animal access, including potential secondary poisoning hazard.	Need to prevent domestic animal access. Limited potential for secondary poisoning? However, known to be very toxic to many native animals (see above).

1080	Pindone
No cumulative effects.	Repeated small doses can be more lethal than a single dose. Can persist for several weeks.
Readily degraded and no environmental persistence. Readily degraded by some bacteria and fungi.	Unknown, but second generation anticoagulants are known to persist in the environment.
Can affect animal fertility but REVERSIBLE.	Can affect animal fertility which is generally NON-REVERSIBLE.
Relatively cheap.	More costly than 1080.
Relatively rapid knockdown.	May require a longer period to achieve the desired result than 1080. Thus damage is likely to occur over this period.

### Warren fumigation

Warren fumigation is best done by a trained professional as the fumigation used is phosphine, which is lethal to most life forms. As with warren ripping, it could be more cost effective to band together with neighbours and fumigate warrens on multiple properties at the same time.

### Prevent their return

Now that you've got rid of the rabbits you need to stop them moving back in. It is important to keep up regular control activities to prevent large numbers becoming re-established.

### Fencing

Rabbit proof fencing can be a key technique to stop these pests moving back into your property. If you use rabbit proof netting, care must be taken to repair any breaches as soon as they are noticed to ensure long-term control is maintained. Any gates or entry/exit points within the fence should also be made as rabbit-proof as practicable. It is important to note that rabbit proof fencing is more costly than standard fencing, so you need to weigh up the benefits and practicality of excluding rabbits from your property before embarking on a fencing project.

### Integrated control is the key

Don't rely on one method to control rabbits as not every method will be 100% effective. For the best results, use an integrated approach to achieve a long-term result.

### References

For more information:

<https://www.pestsmart.org.au/rabbit-warren-destruction-by-ripping/>

[https://www.pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/180502\\_RABFS8.pdf](https://www.pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/180502_RABFS8.pdf)

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