

14 May 2004

Mrs. Kay Elson MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs. Elson,

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT ON AGRICULTURE OF PEST ANIMALS

Summary:

1. Our proposal for an Australasian Invasive Animal Cooperative Research Centre will bring together all States and Territories to address many pest animal problems.
2. There is a need for a National Strategy that will guide groups like ours in setting priorities.
3. Agricultural and Environmental impacts and implications cannot be separated, a nil tenure approach may be required.
4. It is imperative that engagement of communities and regions is achieved as individual action against pest animals is not enough.
5. Resources for pest animal control are inadequate and need to be significantly bolstered.
6. Potential new invasive species and increases in range of existing species need to be considered along with current problems.

The Pest Animal Control Cooperative Research Centre (PAC CRC) provides the following comments in relation to each of the Terms of Reference to the above inquiry. PAC CRC and its predecessor the Vertebrate Biocontrol CRC, are funded by the Commonwealth CRC Programme to develop practical, cost-effective and socially acceptable products and strategies to reduce pest animal damage in Australia. Initially the CRC worked almost exclusively on “immunocontraception¹” for the rabbit, fox and mouse. In the past three years the CRC has expanded its programs significantly, developing new approaches for baiting foxes, wild dogs and feral pigs and taking on the “daughterless²” research program for carp control.

PAC CRC currently has seven members (CSIRO, the Universities of Adelaide, Sydney, Western Australia and the Australian National University and the Agriculture Protection

¹ “Immunocontraception” uses an animal’s immune system to react against the reproductive system causing infertility. Active research in this area began in Australia in 1991 and the system appears to hold promise in the mouse, using a virus to spread infertility.

² “Daughterless” refers to a concept whereby development of female fish may be blocked by a gene silencing technique. A population could, in theory, be driven into extinction by being overwhelmed by males. Australia is the only country doing active research in this area, with work only commencing in 2003.

Board and Department of Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia). PAC CRC is in year five of its seven year term and is seeking to convert into a new entity, Australasian Invasive Animal CRC Ltd., which is expected to have more than 35 members, with all Australian States and Territories involved, from 1 July 2005.

At the end of our submission, we have provided a list of recommendations for your committee to consider that we believe would lift the level of innovation in pest animal management in Australia with significant benefit to farming and grazing industries.

TOR 1. To identify nationally significant pest animal issues and consider how existing Australian and State government processes can be better linked for more coordinated management of these issues across State boundaries.

The Federal Science Minister will launch a report “Counting the cost: Impact of Invasive Animals in Australia 2004”, commissioned by the PAC CRC, on 26 May in Parliament House. We believe the impact of vertebrate pest animals is, conservatively, in the order of three-quarters of a billion dollars annually.

In terms of impacts on agriculture, we would rank the following species as the “Pest Animals of National Significance”.

Pest	Potential threats	Linkage opportunities
European rabbit	Rabbit haemorrhagic disease (calicivirus) has had an estimated \$4 billion positive impact on Australia in the period 1996-2002 (Ryan, 2003). Development of resistance to RHDV is a significant threat to Australia.	Understanding why the virus hasn't been successful in some parts of the country represents an opportunity to yield more benefits from RHDV biocontrol.
European red fox	Western Australia is able to surface bait for foxes because of natural resistance to 1080 poison in native fauna. This ability increases the cost effectiveness of fox control enormously and if a method to surface bait in Eastern Australia could be developed, more options become available for control. Foxes continue to expand their range in the north of Australia and have recently been introduced to Tasmania.	There is opportunity to facilitate large-scale fox control programs that cross land tenure between natural resource managers (National parks) and farming and grazing operations. The “stick” of legislative requirement for landholders to reduce fox numbers is hard to enforce and rarely, if ever, used. More “carrot” approaches are needed.
Wild dog	Wild dogs greatly affect the viability of the sheep industry. Sheep farming is unsustainable in some regions if effective wild dog control is not present. We are likely to see a continued move to cattle production, reducing diversification of farms. Wild dogs and foxes appear to be having an increasing impact on	As for the fox, there can be minimal benefit to an individual producer undertaking wild dog control if surrounding landholders fail to do so. Any approach that encourages community and regional action (along the lines of Landcare, Bushcare or local catchment groups) is likely to yield better results than a simple compulsion

	agriculture through actual spread of disease (eg. \$34M cost of Neospora to the Queensland cattle industry) and have a potentially devastating impact should exotic diseases (eg rabies) enter the country.	on individuals.
Feral pig	Impact numerous industries directly (e.g. cane, lambs, crops) and pose important risk factor to other industries (e.g. cattle, sheep, domestic pigs).	Greater integration of feral pig control efforts is essential.
Mouse	Significant periodic damage to grain crops. Opportunity for a new biotechnical solutions (PAC CRC-GRDC initiative), but current anti-GM debate may have an impact.	Information on when to take action could be improved.

TOR 2. To consider the approaches to pest animal issues across all relevant jurisdictions, including:

- ***Prevention of new pest animals becoming established; birds, fish aquarium trade & releases pose a real threat to freshwater environments***
- ***Detection and reporting systems for new and established pest animals;***
- ***Eradication of infestations (particularly newly established species or ‘sleeper species’ such as deer, camels etc could be major problems – compete for feed) populations of species which are considered to be high risk) where feasible and appropriate;***
- ***Reduction of the impact of established pest animal populations and***
- ***Co-ordination across jurisdictions crucial.***

The cross-jurisdiction and cross-industry issues related to pest animal control illustrate some of the difficulties of making headway. Our CRC is often faced with situations where pest animals are considered important by a commodity group, but are of a second- or third-order nature. The cross-jurisdictional nature of the pests tends to mean there is little feeling of “ownership” of pest problems at an industry level, even though individual producers are highly affected. Even when an industry group recognises a problem exists, there can be significant argument over who should pay. For example, feral pigs present an immediate problem to some industries in causing direct damage whereas they pose a potential major problem through exotic disease transfer to other industries. It is very difficult to organise joint funding of projects for this type of issue in the face of all the other priorities facing industry groups.

TOR 3. Consider the adequacy of State Government expenditure on pest animal control in the context of other conservation and natural resource management priorities, with particular reference to National Parks.

In relation to the importance of pest animals and other invasives (weeds, insects, marine and freshwater) there needs to be a massive reprioritisation of investments. It is generally recognised that invasive plants and animals represent the second biggest threat to biodiversity, yet programs to combat these problems are miniscule in relation to other agricultural and environmental problems.

The Commonwealth’s National Feral Animal Control (DAFF) program’s budget has been \$1.1M (2001/2002), \$0.75M (2002/2003) and \$0.60M (2003/2004). The DEH program has often had long delays in funding programs, tenders out programs with very short timeframes

for response (as little as 10 days) and is also small in nature. Neither program works to an agreed strategic plan.

Better coordination and linkages are required, but all Australian governments need to consider a significant long-term commitment to combating invasive plants and animals. This is an area where virtually no conflict exists between natural resource managers and agricultural land users, so significant gains can be expected from new investment.

The Australian Weeds Committee is provided with secretariat support, whereas the Vertebrate Pest Committee (VPC) is not. It is difficult for the VPC to develop and manage plans with no support. VPC has very little communication beyond its membership – secretarial support would enable it to communicate with other interested parties.

TOR 4. Consider the scope for industry groups and R&D Corporations to improve their response to landholder concerns about pest animals.

There is considerable scope for improving industry group and RDC response to landholder concerns about pest animals. As discussed above, it is difficult to get issues such as this, which affect numerous industries, considered on a joint basis. For example, the horticulture and forestry industries benefit substantially from rabbit control, but it is generally considered to be a grazing industry issue and left to AWI and MLA to fund.

The Minister for Agriculture has the right under the PIERD Act and contracts with industry bodies to articulate his priorities. The RDCs are generally very responsive to a request from the Minister to consider a particular issue on a joint basis. A request for them to participate in a National Pest Animal Strategy would get a positive response.

TOR 5. Consider ways to promote community understanding and involvement in pest animals and their management.

If successful in the coming funding round, the Australasian Invasive Animal CRC intends to implement a program of information flow to the community, practical demonstrations of public-private partnerships for regional control and encouragement to use existing state partners to enforce land holder responsibilities. We hope that by vastly improving information available (e.g. real-time survey data on the web) and utilising a range of groups with differing motivations (environmental, conservation, production) we can achieve improved results.

Some of the “working in groups” initiatives implemented on production topics by Meat and Livestock Australia, for example, have been successful. In pest animal control, the benefit of implementing technology or making additional effort may be to the local area, rather than the individual farm unit. One or two locals that don’t implement control can bring down the local benefits of a program. We are trying to better understand the motivations and drivers to improve delivery of programs.

An important function of community involvement may be through identification of new pest animal incursions. We consider community involvement as imperative to the success of the Tasmanian fox eradication program – it is impossible for agencies to detect and destroy animals at very low numbers, yet the most cost effective control is through prevention or early intervention.

1. Encouragement development of a National Pest Animal Control Strategy which includes agreement on a list of “Pest Animals of National Significance” to set a national agenda.
2. Strengthen the Vertebrate Pest Committee by providing a permanent secretariat and increased accountability to stakeholders.
3. Seek joint management of the two NHT-funded programs with DAFF and DEH to ensure a coordinated approach to species that appear on both the “Pest Animals of National Significance listing and as a “Key Threatening Process” under the EPBSC Act 1999.
4. Secure a long-term financial commitment to the NHT Nationally funded programs and significantly increase the Australian government’s contribution in order to secure alignment of State and Territory government programs.
5. Include a joint pest animal research strategy in the Minister of Agriculture’s priorities to rural R&D Corporations.
6. Consider programs that encourage pest animal control by landholders, particularly those that do so on a regional basis.
7. Encourage better information exchange between agencies and to the community, in particular to pick up early incursions (or range increases).

We would be pleased to host your committee at our research centre in Canberra or to appear before the committee for discussions.

I wish you all the best in your important deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Tony Peacock
CHIEF EXECUTIVE