

Introduction

Overview

- 1.1 The agricultural sector makes an enormous contribution to the Australian economy. A recent study indicated that the agricultural sector contributed an average of 3.2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the six years up to and including 2003-04. If raw inputs provided by the agricultural sector to other sectors and domestic inputs purchased by the agricultural sector are factored in, the contribution was 12.1 percent of the national GDP.¹
- 1.2 The threat posed by pest animals is therefore a serious issue not only for the agricultural sector, but also in terms of the consequences that it may have for the Australian economy. The committee's inquiry into the impact of pest animals on agriculture is of critical importance to the well-being of the agricultural sector and the Australian economy. There is ample evidence available to prove that pest animals have a significant impact on Australia's environment and biodiversity.
- 1.3 The committee received evidence in relation to this inquiry from a variety of organisations and individuals. Much of the evidence came from pastoralists and farmers throughout Australia who expressed concern at the impact that pest animals have had, and are continuing to have, on their livelihoods and their way of life.

1 Econtech Pty Ltd, *Australia's Farm-Dependent Economy: Analysis of the Role of Agriculture in the Australian Economy*, Australian Farm Institute, Surry Hills, March 2005, p. ix.

- 1.4 Of particular concern to the committee is the amount of evidence received in relation to the impact that wild dogs are having on the Australian sheep industry. It is apparent that wild dogs have had a devastating impact on sheep graziers in many regions of Australia, to the extent that it is no longer viable for many of them to continue running sheep on their properties. This is of concern not only for the effect that may have on the Australian economy, but also the social ramifications it has for an iconic Australian way of life. It is clear that wild dogs are a pest animal of national significance and that measures for their increased control need to be implemented immediately.
- 1.5 The committee received a considerable amount of evidence about the detrimental effects on agriculture of a range of other pest species, including feral pigs, rabbits, foxes, feral cats, mice and feral camels. A number of submissions also described some native species, such as possums, kangaroos, emus and grey-headed flying foxes, as constituting a pest problem. There was some difference of opinion amongst submitters as to whether native species should be considered as pest animals.
- 1.6 A majority of submissions received by the committee that addressed the issue advocated a national approach to pest animal management, in one form or another. The committee considers that a national approach to pest animal management is important in terms of ensuring the most efficient use of resources and preventing unnecessary duplication of services and research. A national strategy would not necessarily involve federal control; rather, it would incorporate a unified approach to dealing with pest animal issues across jurisdictions, with leadership and coordination at the national level.
- 1.7 The committee also recognises that community involvement and empowerment are vital to ensure efficient on-the-ground control of pest management problems. Many submissions addressed problems that landholders have in managing pest animals, including problems with access to appropriate control methods and personnel, and incursions of pest animals from government lands. The need to address these issues was a particular focus of the inquiry.
- 1.8 The committee also notes the range of submissions that pointed to the need to ensure that pest animal management is carried out humanely. The committee acknowledges the general commitment that exists to humane pest animal control strategies across a range of organisations involved in pest control.

- 1.9 It was apparent, from evidence presented to the committee, that there is a need for consistency of approach to pest animal control across land tenures. Many submissions expressed concern and frustration about the lack of appropriate measures taken by government land managers, in particular national parks, to manage pest animal problems.
- 1.10 A recurring theme throughout the inquiry was the need to facilitate programs which allow landholders and other interested persons to use pest animals as resources. The committee notes with concern that in a number of cases, animals which might otherwise be utilised for meat or skins are being left to rot in paddocks due to regulations and other impediments to their effective use as resources. The committee considers that facilitating the use of pest species – both native and exotic – as a resource is a useful strategy, both economically and environmentally, in the overall management of pest animals.
- 1.11 The need for ongoing research and development, and education about pest animals was also an important theme in evidence submitted to the inquiry. Given the wide-spread nature of pest animal problems and their significance on a national scale, the committee believes that coordination at the federal level is urgently required.

Previous Parliamentary Reports

- 1.12 This report covers some similar ground to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee Report on the regulation, control and management of invasive species and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Invasive Species) Bill 2002. That report was tabled in December 2004.
- 1.13 The Invasive Species inquiry was referred to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee on 26 June 2003.
- 1.14 The terms of reference for that inquiry required the committee to investigate the regulation, control and management of invasive species, being non-native flora and fauna that may threaten biodiversity. The committee gave particular reference to, *inter alia*, the nature and extent of the threat that invasive species pose to the Australian environment and economy; the estimated cost of different responses to environmental issues associated with invasive species; the adequacy and effectiveness of

administrative arrangements for regulation and control; and the effectiveness of Commonwealth-funded measures to control invasive species.

- 1.15 Although the Invasive Species report addressed some issues in common with the current report, the following major differences exist between the two reports:
- The Senate report considered primarily the threats posed to the environment by invasive species, rather than threats to Australia's agricultural industries;
 - The Senate report considered the impact of weeds and pest animals while the current report focuses solely on pest animals;
 - The terms of reference for the Senate inquiry focused on particular animals and insects, namely the European fox, feral cat and pig, yellow crazy ant, fire ant and cane toad;
 - The Senate report focused on the impact of non-native species, while the current report also considers the impact, often significant, of native species that impact on agriculture.
- 1.16 Despite the differences in focus between the Senate inquiry and the current inquiry, the committee notes that some of the recommendations contained in this report echo recommendations made by the Senate committee, in particular the recommendation for a national effort to combat invasive species.²
- 1.17 The committee also notes that one of the General Purpose Standing Committees of the New South Wales Legislative Council conducted an inquiry into the damage caused by feral animals to the environment. The report from this inquiry was published in October 2002. Although the inquiry focused on environmental impacts rather than agricultural impacts, the committee has considered the contents of that report and referred to parts of it in the body of this report, where relevant.

2 Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee, *Turning back the tide – the invasive species challenge: Report on the regulation, control and management of invasive species and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Invasive Species) Bill 2002*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, December 2004, Recommendation 1.

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.18 The inquiry into the impact of pest animals on agriculture was referred to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry by the then Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Honourable Warren Truss MP, on 16 March 2004.
- 1.19 Details of the inquiry were advertised in national and rural newspapers across Australia in April 2004 and letters inviting submissions were sent out to selected organisations and individuals. One hundred and three submissions were received from around the country.
- 1.20 The inquiry was suspended in late 2004 following the dissolution of the House of Representatives prior to the October election. The inquiry was then re-referred to the committee by Minister Truss on 7 January 2005.
- 1.21 The committee held public hearings in Canberra, Albury and Cooma, Longford, Perth and Broome. Evidence was taken at the public hearings from government representatives, scientific and research organisations, agriculturalists and pastoralists, farmer and industry groups, sport shooting groups, conservation groups and animal welfare organisations.
- 1.22 The committee conducted a series of inspections in Tasmania in March 2005. The committee visited Connorville Station, a 44,000 acre property 14 kilometres south of Cressy that is used for mixed grazing, forestry and cropping. The committee was provided with information in relation to Connorville's Property-based Game Management Plan, which regulates visits to the property by shooters who assist in controlling populations of feral deer, wallaby and possums.
- 1.23 The committee then visited Elverton Pastoral Company, located in Blessington, and used primarily for dry land agriculture, grazing, irrigation, native forest and timber forestry. The committee heard about serious pest animal issues on the property, including deer, wallaby, possums and white cockatoos and inspected the vermin-proof fence that has been constructed on the property.
- 1.24 The committee also visited Lenah Game Meats at Rocherlea, which processes and packages a range of game meats, including wallaby and possum. The committee was told about the commercial use that can be made of over-abundant native species and potential problems facing entrepreneurs in this industry.

- 1.25 Three inspections were also conducted in Western Australia. On 12 April 2005, the committee travelled to Yuin Station, where local pastoralists attended to discuss problems caused by over-abundant populations of emus and kangaroos, and problems with the standard of the existing state barrier fence. The committee then travelled to Leonora, in the Goldfields region, where it conducted roundtable discussions with pastoralists from around the region in relation to predation of livestock by feral dogs.
- 1.26 In July 2005, the committee again travelled to Western Australia and visited Warrawagine Station, where the committee was presented with information about large numbers of wild camels causing damage to infrastructure on the property, and to the environment.
- 1.27 A list of submissions, exhibits and public hearings is located at the back of this report.

Structure of the report

- 1.28 During the course of its inquiry, the committee found that pest animals, both vertebrates and invertebrates, are having a devastating impact on Australian agriculture and on the environment. Urgent measures are required to add to, and improve on, existing measures that are being taken to address the problem.
- 1.29 Chapters 2 and 3 establish the context for this inquiry by examining the impact that pest animals have on agriculture, the environment and rural communities. Chapter 2 examines the pest animal issues facing agriculturalists. It sets out the major pest species impacting on agriculture, including wild dogs, feral pigs, foxes, rabbits, mice, camels, kangaroos and eagles. Consideration is given to the issue of native species that impact on agriculture, and whether they should be categorised as 'pests'.
- 1.30 Chapter 3 discusses the economic impacts that pest animals are having on Australian agriculture. Although difficult to quantify, the environmental and social impacts of pest animals are also considered.
- 1.31 Although some pest animal issues are of particular relevance in certain states and territories, or regions within states and territories, pest animals generally, and the impact that they have on agriculture, are issues of national significance. Chapter 4 considers possibilities for a national approach to pest animal management, while acknowledging and maintaining the important contribution made by local and regional groups.

- 1.32 Prevention of pest species from entering Australia, or from spreading once arrived, is far preferable to dealing with pest populations once they have become established. Chapter 5 examines existing methods of prevention and detection of pest species and steps that can be taken to make these processes more effective.
- 1.33 Chapter 6 examines the methods currently in place for managing existing pest animal problems, and suggestions for changes and improvements in methods of pest control. In particular, this chapter examines the controversial use of 1080 poison as a means of controlling pest animal populations. The adequacy of state and territory government expenditure in the context of other natural resource and conservation management priorities is also considered.
- 1.34 A recurring theme throughout the inquiry was the need for all landholders to control pest animals on their land. Concerted efforts by a majority of landholders may be wasted if an adjoining landholder is careless or neglectful. Chapter 7 considers the need for pest animal management across tenures and strategies for its implementation.
- 1.35 Opportunities exist for landholders to utilise some pests, both exotic and native, as a resource by means of harvesting and hunting. Chapter 8 looks at ways in which landholders can manage pest animal populations while at the same time accessing a valuable resource to supplement income from agriculture.
- 1.36 Chapter 9 examines the research that has been conducted to date with regard to pest animal issues. It considers avenues for further research to be conducted, and opportunities for research and development corporations to become more involved. The need for national coordination of pest animal research is considered.
- 1.37 Chapter 10 considers the importance of public education in relation to pest animal management, and strategies for increasing public awareness and involvement.