



SPORTING SHOOTERS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA INC.

**House of Representatives
Standing Committee On Agriculture
Fisheries and Forestry
C/- Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600**

May 2004

A SUBMISSION ON BEHALF OF THE SPORTING SHOOTERS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA INC. WITH REGARD TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT ON AGRICULTURE OF PEST ANIMALS

The Sporting Shooters Association of Australia Inc. welcomes the opportunity to present a submission as part of the inquiry process. The SSAA is a national organisation with over 100,000 members and is the foremost body in Australia representing firearm owners' interests. The Association promotes a broad range of firearm sports, including hunting, at the local, state, national and international level and currently holds official Non-Government Organisation status within the United Nations. This submission represents the concerns and experiences of SSAA members and the aim is to encourage informed debate.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee On Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry is to inquire into the impact on agriculture of pest animals in line with the following terms of reference, which SSAA will address on a point by point basis.

- 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.*

Many sport shooting organisation are currently involved in monitoring exotic and pest vertebrate species across borders. This work is often being undertaken in conjunction with the State government departments as well as within the sport shooting organisations themselves. This co-operation and co-ordination can be utilized as a foundation for the coordinated management for vertebrate pest species across Australia.

The Hunting and Conservation Branch of the SSAA is a classic example of an existing National program that both assists with and monitors vertebrate pest animal populations. For over a decade, as volunteers, they have assisted both National Parks and private landholders in assessing the level of pest infestation and in reducing the numbers of a pest population where habitat damage is occurring. At this point in time, the Hunting and Conservation Branch of SSAA already form a coordinated and well-

linked body and the SSAA is prepared to further develop this Branch , in association with relevant Government bodies, to identify nationally significant pest animal issues. In the initial stages of any cross border program it may be prudent to produce a list of the top ten Pest Animals of National Significance (PANS) in the same way that the CRC Australian Weed Management produced a list of the top Weeds of National Significance (WONS) and commence major endeavors controlling these, while developing additional programs for more localized regions. Utilizing Associations like the SSAA allows a grass roots approach that would form a second arm to the more research orientated Pest Animal CRC, combining them to produce cost-effective, practical strategies to reduce pest animal damage in Australia.

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

- *prevention of new pest animals becoming established;*
- *detection and reporting systems for new and established pest animals;*
- *eradication of infestations (particularly newly established species or 'sleeper' populations of species which are considered to be high risk) where feasible and appropriate; and*
- *reduction of the impact of established pest animal populations.*

While many research bodies are working on sophisticated biotechnological methods to control pest animal species, the majority of research solutions are decades away from commercial release. Even then, some will be prohibitively expensive or too risky because of secondary effects on other species or biospheres. SSAA believe that by expanding the already existing efforts of Australian hunting organisations it is possible to achieve more cost effective, individually tailored programs for land managers and conservation areas, which include National Parks. The Hunting and Conservation Branch of the SSAA already incorporate recording and monitoring of rare native species (plant and animal) and feral species (plant and animal) as part of their regular activities during pest animal control programs. Currently, the information is only passed onto National Parks or land managers when they request it. This program could be formalized and expanded to assist in the detection and monitoring of pest animal species. Such an approach provides an early warning system for new pest species and the sudden expansion of 'sleeper' species as well as providing for the monitoring and reporting of established species. The activities of hunters' can assist in the reduction and control of existing identified pest animal populations.

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.

The cost of pest animal control, as well as weed control, is often ignored or approached in a haphazard manner, particularly in National Parks or on Crown Land. This is because of funding restraints and the constant balancing of immediate priorities versus long-term priorities. This is particularly evident when pest animals are present at low numbers or are difficult to monitor and more pressing tasks are present. While it is recognized that eradication of pest animal species is the ideal solution if we are to claim success for the conservation of pristine native eco-systems the reality is that the best solution is to maintain pest animal numbers at levels below which they will not cause damage to the environment.

Pest animal species frequently exist in states of flux, represented by the traditional boom-bust cycles. The cost of large-scale control programs when population numbers explode is substantial, but short term and relatively cost effective in terms of dollars per animal. It is in the long-term control stage where aggressive management techniques become expensive and draining, but must be maintained to prevent a boom cycle reoccurring. For example: in South Australia aerial and ground culling was introduced to reduce the number of feral goats on National Parks in the mid and far north. Initially, the numbers of goats culled using aerial shooting was high, but as numbers decreased the cost of employing a pilot, a trained marksman and a helicopter rose on a per animal basis until the cost is no longer effective. Over the same time period, ground based culling occurred, provided by trained marksmen from the Hunting and Conservation Branch on a volunteer basis. According to Department of Environment and Heritage data on this program ground-based control also proved to be an effective method of goat control in the Flinders Ranges project area. Since 1992, members of the SSAA have culled over 25,000 goats across the region with the focus mainly on National Park reserves. This has involved a minimum of 700 Hunting and Conservation members and in excess of 3,800 shooter days since the program commenced. All this has been provided free of charge to DEH and provides an example of a coordinated management program that has been of immense value to the Government and the Australian community. This type of program is also being provided on a smaller scale to individual landowners.

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

The SSAA endorse ongoing biotechnological research by industry and R&D Corporations. However, we are of the opinion that this should not occur at the cost of simpler, practical approaches that can be adopted on a range of scales from the small landholder to the large National Parks and conservation areas. The problem of pest animal species can often be addressed by bringing together, on a local and regional scale, the key stakeholder groups – farmers, hunters and government authorities and developing an integrated management program that may include arrange of methods from ensuring buffer zones, poisoning through to ongoing control of numbers by hunting. SSAA emphases that the activity of hunting can, and should, include a monitoring program agreed to by the major stakeholders.

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

Of particular importance from the SSAA's perspective is point (5) of the inquiry's terms of reference and the various ways in which the rural community may become more involved in, and benefit from, pest animal management. The Association believes the Committee should seriously consider the significant contribution hunting makes to the integrated management of pest species, especially for the direct control of pest populations in order to reduce their impact on Australia's agricultural industries. Professor David Bellamy, noted environmentalist and academic, has observed "It is my firm belief that if you take hunting, shooting and fishing out of the vital mix of conservation management, the result would be catastrophic."¹

The 1998 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee report into the commercial use of wildlife pointed out that apart from helping to control destructive feral pests, pressure from hunters and their representative

organisations helped to ensure that land was set aside for conservation. At the same time, hunting makes an important financial contribution to preservation efforts across Australia, with the money raised from licenses and fees aiding in the maintenance of vital natural habitats. According to Dr David Carter, game license fees have raised more than \$20 million in Victoria alone since 1958, with the funds going towards the purchase of wetland areas for inclusion in public game reserves.² This figure is measured the tip of the iceberg in regard to funding from hunters being directed to habitat conservation and the economy.

While the benefits of recreational hunting are well documented and generally accepted in terms of habitat preservation and pest management, the dividends relate chiefly to government controlled areas. Large sections of rural Australia are in private hands and the SSAA believes that, because of legislative restraints, landholders in some jurisdictions cannot offer recreational hunting. This undermines incentives for habitat rehabilitation and sustainable environmental management in the private sector. Recreational hunting provides an alternative source of land management, particularly where land use is marginal. Hunting is a well documented as being the least damaging form of eco-tourism and encourages integrated land management practices that ultimately result in more habitat and minimum disturbance for native wildlife.

The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee noted that there are three main ways in which conservation can benefit from the commercial utilisation of wildlife, even when pest animals are driving the management practices. Firstly, it is possible to provide incentives for private landholders to preserve habitat which would otherwise require government funding for conservation via the public nature reserves system or which would not be conserved at all. Secondly, by managing overabundant wildlife, which can cause incalculable damage to the environment and add a direct cost to landowners (private or government) in lost income and alternative expensive control programs. Thirdly, by providing direct and indirect revenue to the entire community from wildlife and associated industry activities.³

Apart from the direct return to the landholder, the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee concluded that a recreational hunting industry provides a valuable economic contribution to small country towns. Safari style tours and farm-based hunting operations bring people into rural areas for days or weeks at a time, and money is spent on fuel, food, accommodation, ammunition and clothing. For example: a recent survey conducted in Victoria found that the duck shooting industry was worth \$30 million and quail hunting worth \$6 million to the state's economy.⁴ Apart from the fiscal return to the community from hunting there are other unmeasured returns because the conserved landscape provides non-hunting tourists with alternative destinations.

The SSAA contends that many of the economic opportunities outlined in the Committee's report are being denied to private landholders as a result of current legislation. While depriving landholders of the fiscal benefits of farm-based hunting operations, current legislation in several states also removes an important incentive for privately funded environmental rehabilitation. The SSAA maintains that landholders able to supplement their income through expanded recreational hunting activities are more likely to consider options such as the reforestation of unproductive land, the restoration and maintenance of degraded watercourses and reductions in stock rates. This hypothesis is supported by the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and

Transport References Committee's report, which found that hunting has considerable potential to assist with conservation objectives. Ironically, this benefit is more pronounced for areas of land perceived to have little other economic value, such as marginal agricultural land, or swamps, and wetlands⁵, which are frequently drained to produce agricultural land.

The Council of Australian Government's Competition Principles Agreement has a direct bearing on the disadvantages suffered by landholders. Among the Agreement's criteria for assessing the costs and benefits of particular legislation is the issue of economic and regional development, including employment and investment growth.⁶ As previously noted, the 1998 Senate Committee report determined that recreational hunting made a valuable contribution to the rural economy. As yet this has not been factored into pest management control programs. The SSAA believes that the full potential of hunting as part of a fully integrated management program for pest species has been ignored and eroded as a result of the current failure of legislation to recognize its use as a control method and financial incentive. With this in mind, the SSAA believes that, where appropriate, the Commonwealth should encourage State governments to amend their respective legislation to allow for the conduct of farm-based hunting operations that can occur as part of an integrated pest control approach on individual farms, or across regions. With the Council of Australian Government's Competition Principles Agreement as a guide, the SSAA believes that the potential for better management of Australia's pest animals will produce significant economic benefits, including increased investment and greater employment opportunities in the rural sector. This makes it imperative that legislation to manage animal pest species through hunting be introduced as soon as possible.

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References

¹ Carter, D. (1999). The Future of recreational hunting in Australia. Kent Town: Sporting Shooters Association of Australia Inc., p. 4

² *ibid.*, p. 40.

³ Commercial Utilisation of Australian Native Wildlife, Report of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Review of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979: Issues Paper. Government of New South Wales, 2001.