

First Floor, 183 North Quay, Brisbane, Qld, 4000
PO Box 13186, George Street Brisbane Qld 4003

Telephone: (07) 3236 3100
Facsimile: (07) 3236 3077
Email: agforce@agforceqld.org.au



Submission to the Inquiry

**The House of Representatives Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Committee Inquiry into The Impact of Pest Animals on Agriculture.**

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Contact: Will Banks – AgForce Sheep & Wool policy director

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Introduction

AgForce is the peak rural lobby group in Queensland, representing over 8,000 sheep and wool, cattle and grain producers.

AgForce's mission is "To promote and protect the social fabric and economic prosperity of its members and rural communities in Queensland."

AgForce is a member of the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) as well as members of the commodity councils, WoolProducers, Sheepmeat Council of Australia, Cattle Council of Australia and the Grains Council of Australia.

AgForce have Pest Animal & Plant committee dedicated to dealing with pest animals and plant issues that effect the businesses of AgForce members.

Pest animals are a major concern for Queensland primary producers having a broad range of effects on livestock and crop production. As well as directly impacting on primary producers, pest animals also affect the prosperity of rural communities.

There are a large number of pest animals found in Queensland that have devastating impacts on agriculture. This submission will briefly outline the impact of each pest.

Feral Dogs

Unpublished data estimates that feral dogs are costing over \$18 million in livestock predation losses alone every year in Queensland.

As well as predication losses, feral dogs are estimated to cost the cattle industry at least \$9 million annually through the spread of disease such as neospora caninum and hydatidosis.

Neospora caninum, a microscopic parasite, that has been shown to be a significant cause of bovine abortion, lower milk production and reduced weight gain in cattle throughout the world.

In some areas such as the north coast of NSW, neospora caninum is thought to be responsible for over 30% of abortions in cattle and initial investigations in northern Queensland dairy herds estimated that over 25% of these cattle are infected with this parasite. The extent of the impact of neospora caninum on the Queensland beef industry is yet to be fully investigated.

Neospora Caninum is contracted by a cow eating parasite oocysts “eggs” defaecated by a carnivore, such as a feral dog. Feral dogs probably become infected after eating infected foetal tissue or afterbirth, and then pass parasite oocysts in their faeces for up to several months. If a feral dog defaecates in stored feed or in water sources, this may result in the infection of a large number of animals and potentially an abortion epidemic.

Feral dogs are almost solely responsible for the spread of hydatidosis. Hydatidosis is a hidden cost for the cattle industry. The disease is widespread in the cattle population and it is estimated to result in about half of all livers being condemned. Where a liver is condemned, its value drops from about \$1.20/kg (for human consumption) to 20 cents/kg (for pet food). Even though feral dogs are responsible for spreading hydatidosis to the cattle population, it is not yet clear how the relationship works in practice.

As well as the direct impact on primary producers, AgForce can see the impact feral dogs are having on agricultural communities. The sheep and wool industries are labour intensive and the major employers in many agricultural communities. A growing feral dog population is forcing producers out of the sheep industry and into cattle production. This industry change is creating broad scale unemployment in Queensland agricultural communities and forcing families to leave the towns.

Feral dogs are also reducing a graziers’ ability to alter their on-property mix of sheep and cattle according to changes in seasonal and economic conditions. A large feral dog population physically prevents a grazier running a sheep enterprises. The effects of these management restraints have a direct impact on the producer and flow-on to affect the prosperity of agricultural communities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the feral dog population is growing rapidly in Queensland, with feral dogs moving into areas where they were never present.

It has been estimated that wild dogs cost \$33 million annually when predation losses are combined with the control costs.

While AgForce does not represent horticulture producers, AgForce are aware of the significant amount of damage that feral dogs cause to fruit and vegetable production in areas of the state.

It needs to be stressed that feral dogs affect all agricultural enterprises, whether that be sheep and wool production, cattle production or horticulture.

Feral Pigs

Like feral dogs, feral pigs have a devastating impact on Queensland agriculture. Feral pigs are widely distributed across Queensland and affect all agricultural enterprises

AgForce estimates that feral pig damage to the environment and livestock losses was estimated to cost about \$70 million annually.

Feral pigs are a major risk in any potential exotic disease outbreaks. Feral pigs already spread disease with the cattle industry; Leptospirosis is a disease that causes infertility in cattle herds across the state.

Feral pigs severely effect lamb and goat-kid survival rates. Anecdotal evidence suggests that feral pig predation of young lambs and kid can result in losses of up to 30 per cent.

Feral pigs also reduce the amount of land that is available to graze due to the destruction of pastures.

Foxes

Foxes are a major problem for Queensland sheep & wool industry. Foxes have a devastating impact on lamb and goat kid survival rates. Like feral pigs, foxes prey on young lamb and kids.

Foxes are also of concern regarding the potential to spread livestock diseases

Kangaroos

Kangaroos have a devastating effect on the grazing areas of Queensland. Kangaroos also significantly impact on crop production. Due to improved water infrastructure provided by primary producers, an unnatural and unsustainable kangaroo population has become established across the state.

Primary producers are able regulate the grazing impact that domestic animals place on the environment through management practices. Primary producers are unable to control the movement or grazing patterns of kangaroos, meaning kangaroos can heavily impact on areas that need to be protected.

AgForce recognises that kangaroos are an important resource for many agricultural communities. AgForce see it as vital to the protection of the environment and the ongoing productivity of agriculture that kangaroos are managed in a sustainable way.

Rabbits

Rabbits have been impacting on Queensland agriculture for a long time. While various control programs developed over time have dramatically reduced the Queensland rabbit population, there is still a large number of rabbits negatively impacting on agricultural production. There must be continued research, development and implementation of rabbit control measures undertaken.

Feral Deer

The production and environmental impacts of feral deer in South East Queensland is of great concern of AgForce. AgForce have been calling for this introduced menace to be declared a pest by the Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines & Energy. This would place a requirement on all landholders including state government agencies to control the animal.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that feral deer numbers are on the increase and moving away from their traditional National Park havens.

Feral deer pose problems due to the significant environmental and production damage that they do to plant life and crops such as flowers, fruit and vegetables. Feral deer are also a host for cattle ticks and have been held responsible by some landholders for outbreaks that have cost thousands of dollars in eradication campaigns and chemicals.

Locusts

The monitoring and control of Locusts has never been of greater importance. This year has seen significant population of Locust develop ultimately causing the majority of damage in a completely different location to the breeding grounds.

As the locusts mature and migrate they have caused complete crop devastation in their path.

Mice

Whilst the recent registration of Zinc Phosphide (Mouseoff®) has provided producers with an option to control mice once populations have noticeably increased. There is still a need for close monitoring and communication of locations of mouse populations necessary to control.

Dramatic increases in field mice populations cause significant damage to crops also damaging inhabited dwellings and grain storage.

Recommendations

- AgForce would like to reinforce that a national approach to the management of all pest animals is essential for the sustainability of agriculture. It must be recognised that pest animals do not recognise state boundaries and it is essential for the future of agriculture that a national approach to pest animal management is adopted. This national approach would have the ability to co-ordinate the existing, successful work undertaken by state governments.

- Many industry groups and research and development corporations have undertaken significant amounts of work focused on the impact of the pest animals on agriculture. Many state departments have also invested significantly in research into the impact of pest animals. The creation of a national pest animal resource bank would be highly beneficial for both government and landholders.
- There is a need for greater state and federal government expenditure to develop a national program designed to control and eradication of pest animals.
- When considering pest animals, government and landholders need to have a goal of eradication not control.

Conclusion

AgForce's are concerned about the impact of pest animals on agriculture, particularly in relation to animal welfare, the economic consequences and the environmental impact. Pest animals are the greatest threat to the future viability of many agricultural enterprises in Queensland.