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The Secretary
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

14th May, 2004

Dear Sir / Madam,

Re: The Impact of Pest Animals on Agriculture Inquiry

“In Australia 10 million lambs are lost annually in their first week of life” (Alex Ball, MLA Prime Time *Making More From Merinos* Forum, Benalla, Victoria, 11/5/04).

If you consider a finished prime lamb to be worth approximately \$85 today, a first cross ewe lamb to be worth approximately \$130 or a merino ewe lamb to be worth \$90, this is a significant economic statement with an impact across Australia. The fox, though not the sole contributor to this figure, certainly plays a significant role as a skilled, cunning predator.

As a Landcare Group, the pest animal we have worked together to control is the fox. This submission is based on the past experiences the Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group has faced when controlling fox populations.

The Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group is situated in the Mid Ovens region of the North East Catchment Management Authority in Victoria. It is an area surrounded by crown land (managed by the Department of Sustainability & Environment) leading into National Parks, and private pine plantations (owned & managed by Hancock Pines). A diverse range of agricultural enterprises including beef, dairy, prime lamb, wool, grain, grapes and hops are all pursued by members of this Landcare Group.

The pest animals that are a recognised and considerable threat to agricultural enterprises in this area are:

- foxes
- wild dogs
- feral cats
- cockatoos
- kangaroos
- wombats

Foxes and wild dogs kill viable lambs & disrupt lambing & calving, cockatoos decimate horticultural crops, irrigation paddocks & trees, while kangaroos & wombats destroy fences, pastures and horticultural production.

Given our proximity to crown land & National Parks, with numerous properties sharing boundaries with crown land, landholders within the Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group are also concerned to protect native wildlife, where foxes, wild dogs and feral cats are a major threat. Having fenced off waterways & gullies, in addition to creating wildlife corridors over the last 14 years, an environment has been provided for the native wildlife. The group is concerned that the increasing number of these pest animals will limit the success of these programs.

Pest animals the Landcare Group has classed as potential 'sleeper' populations are:

- Cockatoos – populations continue to increase dramatically each year & cause substantial damage to the area, decimating hectares of grain crops & grape vines, damaging irrigation paddocks and destroying native vegetation.
- Rabbits – recently landholders have reported an increase in the population of rabbits, which is of concern, as the rabbit population had been reduced to a sustainable level over past years.
- Indian Myna – which has been sighted in Myrtleford, approximately 35km East of the Landcare Group. The Indian Myna is a threat to native birds.

Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group's insight into the points raised in the "Terms of Reference"

Terms of reference

- 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.**

It is imperative a whole government approach across every State be developed for the coordination of pest animal control, particularly in reference to the fox. A fox does not distinguish between state boundaries or between crown land and private agricultural land, so to be successful, a coordinated fox control program must interlink between all Catchment Management Authorities in Victoria as well as between States. It must tackle the problem holistically, not relying on private landholders to consistently manage the issue themselves and carry the financial losses.

An example of the lack of coordination across State boundaries would be the Fox Bounty initiative developed by the Victorian Government in 2002 / 2003, which itself only lasted one year. The Victorian Government paid landholders \$10 for every fox tail presented. Neighbouring states (New South Wales and South Australia) were not included and did not initiate their own bounties. However the Department could not distinguish which state each fox was shot in by the tails tendered to them, particularly confusing where landholders owned properties on both sides of the border.

Another example of the lack of coordination is the "fox baiting" program which replaced the Fox Bounty. The State Government announced that a coordinated "fox baiting" program involving all landholders (on private and public land) in the region will be run by trained personnel that were employed to educate and encourage landholders to participate in the program. This is only occurring in specific parts of the State, where the highest number of fox tails were presented. Euroa, approx 90 to 120km away, is the closest town to Carboor / Bobinawarra where this program is running. This means landholders of the North East region do not benefit from this program.

The Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group coordinated a fox baiting program this autumn. It was run concurrently with four neighbouring Landcare Groups baiting programs. However this program was an initiative of the Landcare Groups and funding for the program came from each individual Landcare Group. Encouraging landholders to participate in the program was the Landcare coordinators who are only employed one day a week. A letter was distributed to Hancock Pines (owners of the privately operated pine plantation) and the Department of Sustainability and Environment (managers of the significant hectares of crown land neighbouring the Carboor / Bobinawarra area), asking if they would participate in the fox baiting program. Hancock Pines responded and were involved in the fox baiting program. *There was no response from the Department of Sustainability and Environment and when contacted, they indicated they did not have the resources or the funding to participate.*

However the Catchment Management Officer (CMO) did travel to the local hall for the distribution of baits.

Above are local examples of the uncoordinated approach to the control of foxes in Victoria. The Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group would like to see a national approach for a coordinated fox control program which can be implemented across each State and in turn can be implemented across each Catchment Management Authority and then each Landcare Group. The same coordinated fox control program for the whole of Australia would be more cost effective, achieving greater results and thus a better control of fox populations.

It is so frustrating when Meat & Livestock Australia, funded from producer levies, is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, across Australia, to promote the increase of Australia's sheep flock, yet the Federal & State Governments cannot implement an integrated, long term, sustainable approach to controlling this incredibly destructive predator, the introduced fox!

2. **To consider the approaches to pest animals 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.**

Reducing the impact of the fox, an established pest animal, has been achieved through:

- Baiting with 1080 or 'Fox Off'
- Electric fencing
- Shooting
- Guard dogs, such as the Moama breed
- Alpacas

Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare members continue to use a combination of all of the above, in addition to using the placement of flashing lights and radios in lambing paddocks to deter these predators (or alternately making them 'tame' enough to shoot!). However it is always the **Fox Off bait, 1080, that is most successful at controlling this predator**. For this reason it is imperative that any approach to control or reduce the impact of this animal take seriously the education and use of this poison, increasing rather than decreasing its availability to responsible, registered users.

In a society that is increasingly soft or 'fluffy', access to this poison is becoming more and more difficult to obtain and is rumoured to be being withdrawn altogether in future. Why? Farmers seek to farm in a responsible, sustainable and economically viable manner, however in pursuing this end they use technology, genetics, chemicals, and knowledge. Consumers demand cheaper, better, fresher, more wholesome products, all year round, yet have less and less idea of how their demands are met. We live at a time when people have more degrees but less sense, more knowledge, but less judgment. In undertaking this inquiry, have the guts to learn the truth and recommend real answers.

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.**

Approximately 55% of the total area of the North East region is public land. This means that a significant number of landholders have boundaries adjacent to public land. The public landholders, being the Department of Sustainability and Environment, have limited funds for the control of pest animals, especially foxes. This means **over half of the North East region has either no or only a small amount of pest animal control conducted** at all. There is a huge opportunity to better align the management of public land to the standards demanded by Government of private landholders. As the Carboor/Bobinawarra area is encircled by significant amounts of forested public land, this issue is of great concern to us.

The North East Catchment Management Authority (NECMA) Regional Catchment Strategy has **set no targets for the control of foxes in the region**. The only targets which involve the control of pest animals are articulated as “a net decline in impacts of pest animals on private and public land”. The NECMA are only concentrating on rabbits and wild dogs. With prime lamb producers suffering significant losses in lambs every year due to the fox, this target is weak & pitiful.

One Carboor/ Bobinawarra landholder alone, Mr Geoffrey Bussell, who runs a flock of 1600 breeding ewes, contributes his yearly lamb losses to foxes each year in the vicinity of \$20,000. With his finished lamb prices currently in the vicinity of \$100 per animal, this is not a difficult figure to believe. 70% of gross income in a prime lamb enterprise comes from the sale of lambs (*Wean More Lambs* Publication, page1, published by Meat & Livestock Australia, March 2004). For a lamb enterprise, increased profits stem from having more lambs for sale, it's that simple. The fox, through killing viable lambs and disrupting lambing is the single largest contributor to lamb deaths in their first few weeks of life than any other factor.

Landcare Groups within the North East region receive state funding through the Catchment Management Authorities. In the North East region there is **no provision for aiding landholders with the coordination and implementation of a fox baiting program** from the \$5,000 - \$10,000 allocated. Funding has instead been available for trees, fencing, restricted rabbit control and employing a coordinator for the Landcare Group. While these other initiatives are all of value, it has been frustrating to have this major area of pest animal concern completely neglected.

The Landcare Group was successful in receiving funds through the Australian Government Envirofund for the purchase of fox off baits (half the cost of baits reimbursed to the farmers who participated). However there were limited funds available for a person to coordinate the program and to teach landholders how to use the baits most effectively. While random baiting by a few is still better than no baiting, **a coordinated approach to baiting** encompassing the entire Landcare area is always going to pay more dividends and should be the overall goal.

Another concern the Landcare Group has about pest animal control management is that the **Government has shown a short term approach to the problem**. When funding is distributed to the Landcare Groups it is only ever for one year. This is only placing a band aid solution over the problem. The Landcare Group believe that to conduct a successful pest animal control program it should be funded for at least five years on a sliding scale. This will encourage and educate all landholders in the area on pest animal control methods and ensure that the practice is being incorporated into their farming practices on a yearly, rather than once off, basis.

4. **Consider the scope for industry groups and R & D Corporations to improve their response to landholders concerns about pest animals.**
5. **Consider ways to promote community understanding of and involvement in pest animals and their management.**

The Landcare Group has had their own experience with the lack of community involvement in the control of pest animals. In March they advertised in their newsletter that they would like all members of the Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group to conduct a “fox baiting” program (which was run in conjunction with neighbouring Landcare Groups). Over 170 newsletters were distributed to all landholders in the district. Five landholders responded and took part in the program. Three of these landholders run prime lamb enterprises and the remaining two were their neighbours. Landholders that do not run sheep on their properties were not motivated in participating, as they were unaware of the way foxes can affect their own agricultural businesses or the environment.

A small questionnaire was distributed in the next newsletter asking landholders why they did not participate in the program.

The common responses were that:

- 1/ They do not have an ACUP (and do not want one)
- 2/ They don't know what to do or how to lay the baits
- 3/ The amount of form filling and bureaucratic red tape has deterred them from participating

A landholder of the Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group has recently completed a Farm Chemical Users Course which is a two day course costing \$135 and is a requirement to receive an ACUP (or pink slip), after the landholder pays the Government an additional \$38. The poison 1080 for fox and rabbit control was mentioned briefly, only stating that an ACUP is required for the purchase and use of this poison. There was no mention or training given on the legal method required for the laying of baits or the handling of 1080, or any instructions or ways taught to conduct a baiting program on a property.

Once the landholder has completed their Chemical Farm Users Course and paid for an ACUP they can then purchase "Fox-Off" (1080) and lay baits on their property without any training other than what they receive from the Catchment Management Officer.

The Landcare Group believe this process can be simplified. A training day (two to three hours only) held in the local area can be developed which focuses on coordinated control methods for foxes where landholders are educated on when the optimum time to bait is, how to lay baits and the record keeping required to conduct a baiting program. Landholders can talk to other landholders on their experience with a baiting program. The other methods of fox control can be mentioned like shooting and fumigating fox dens (however further licences and regulations have made these methods more difficult to implement). The landholder can then be given a special licence which would legally entitle them to use 1080 "Fox-Off" baits only, rather than requiring a full Farm Chemical Users Certificate. This will educate as well as encourage landholders to participate in a fox baiting program and address any concerns they may have.

It is important for communities to understand the damage and costs incurred by pest animals. The fox causes much more damage other than just to prime lamb enterprises. Lambing traditionally occurs in the Autumn or Spring, however foxes require feeding all year round. They are opportunistic scavengers and skilled predators, readily substituting lamb for native animals, insects, small domestic animals, rabbits, mice, birds, lizards, frogs, berries, plants or human rubbish, depending on the season & what's available. Coordinating fox baiting programs will help to eliminate this predator; however it is important that communities, not just sheep farmers, participate.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. The Carboor / Bobinawarra Landcare Group wish the Committee every success in deliberating these important issues and in then establishing meaningful, workable recommendations that are effective and have guts! Go for it!

Regards,
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