



**FOUNDATION FOR A RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA'S SUBMISSION TO:
INQUIRY INTO NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION
CHALLENGES**

**SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND
TRANSPORT**

Summary

- Foundation for a Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA) is a non-profit, publicly-funded organisation with the principal purpose of supporting rabbit research and control in Australia.
- The rabbit, even following the occurrence of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD), formerly known as rabbit calicivirus, is the number one economic vertebrate pest in Australia. The rabbit is also a serious threat to many natural ecosystems.
- RFA is greatly concerned that the exceptional agricultural (economic), environmental and social benefits from RHD will continue to be lost through continuing post-RHD complacency amongst national, state and local governments at the political and administrative levels, land managers, R&D funding corporations and the community.
- RFA is concerned that the regional approach to natural resource management, and rabbit control in particular, lacks expertise, understanding of the threat and coordination between groups and land tenures.
- The capacity for individual NRM boards or CMA groups to effectively develop, implement and maintain control policies varies greatly.
- RFA recommends that agricultural and environmental agencies, at both Commonwealth and State levels, link together to develop and implement coordinated policy and R&D directions across all land tenures — rabbit management needs a holistic approach to gain the best and lasting outcome.
- RFA believes that improved community understanding of the recurring rabbit threat and the cost of inaction is a fundamental need leading to consistent R&D funding and acceptable control strategies for rabbits.

Background to RFA

The Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA) is a non-profit entity whose purpose is to encourage research into and communication about the immediate and long-term effects of the European wild rabbit on Australia's natural environment and its natural resource base used for primary production. RFA was formed in 1990 and, prior to the release of rabbit haemorrhagic disease (calicivirus) (RHD) in Australia, was actively promoting research projects in most of the states and the Northern Territory. During the latter part of the 1990s and early in this century, RFA concentrated on building up its

funding base as a result of reduced investment by governments into rabbit research for control purposes.

RFA is also concerned with the complacency of many land managers, both government and private, with respect to rabbit control following RHD, which was particularly successful in the rangelands but less so in the higher rainfall areas. We do not want to see rabbit numbers increasing again as they did following the initial success of myxomatosis in the 1950s through similar complacency. We also believe that further attrition of landscape quality and decline of the natural resources base particularly with the emerging implications of climate change is something to be avoided.

Relevance of this inquiry

RFA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Senate inquiry, given the importance of maintaining and enhancing, where feasible, the wide range of genetic resources and biodiversity contained in Australia's protected areas — much of which is threatened by rabbits.

Rabbit numbers have been steadily increasing in many areas over recent years and there is evidence that resistance to RHD is both present and increasing in wild rabbit populations. RFA is greatly concerned that rabbits could again devastate the Australian landscape. As the majority of vertebrate pest control is undertaken by regional NRM Boards or Catchment Management Authorities (CMA), we believe it to be imperative that rabbit control be of the highest priority in Natural Resource Management plans in regions where wild rabbits occur. The current increase in rabbit numbers in some regions may partly be blamed on complacency among landholders and a lack of coordination in control efforts between natural resource management groups and the problem will only get worse if action is not taken.

Biological controls such as Myxomatosis and RHD have proven to be the most effective management tools for rabbits and RFA acknowledges an urgent need for increased funding into research for new biological controls.

ToR 1: *The lessons learned from the successes and failures of three decades of Commonwealth investment in resource management including Landcare, the Natural Heritage Trust, The National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality, and other national programs.*

The Natural Heritage Trust, through the National Feral Animal Control Program, has supported a range of projects which have resulted in enhanced protection of natural resources through better rabbit management. Some of these include development of best practice management policies for rabbit control techniques such as baiting and use of RHD; development of training packages; decision support systems to aid land managers; improvement of fumigation techniques; and RHD bait delivery. While results of many of these projects are applicable at a state level, there has been a lack of funding for projects that tackle rabbit control on a national scale. Differences in regulations between states and territories concerning bait and toxin use for example mean that many policies developed in these jurisdictions are not really applicable across all regions

and land tenures. RFA believes that urgent funding for development of new biological controls for rabbits is required.

ToR 2: *How we can best build on the knowledge and experience gained from these programs to capitalise on existing networks and projects, and maintain commitment and momentum among land-holders.*

RFA has identified the present commitment of both private landholders and public land managers to effective and continued rabbit control as a serious problem in keeping the impact of wild rabbit populations in Australia to a minimum. Following the success of biological controls such as Myxomatosis and RHD, there has been a tendency for some land managers to become complacent towards active rabbit control in the belief that these diseases have already 'fixed' the problem. Education and awareness of rabbit impacts, the need for integrated control and increasing resistance to existing biological controls in wild rabbits is necessary to maintain commitment and momentum. Assistance from natural resource managers to landholders to carry out effective control is also critical. This could take the form of well developed control policies, knowledgeable staff, access to baits and other control tools, and coordinated control programs across regions and land tenures.

Past programs have developed a wealth of information and expertise in integrated management options. RFA believes NRM groups have a statutory responsibility to ensure that rabbit control in their region is effective and complements action taken in neighbouring areas.

ToR 3: *The overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources*

The regional approach would certainly have benefits in terms of local knowledge of natural resource issues and priorities, however RFA has found that the capacity for individual NRM Boards or CMA groups to develop or implement effective rabbit control needed in their area varies widely.

RFA has been active in urging regional NRM Boards to establish rabbit control policies and has assisted several South Australian NRM Boards in doing so. However we have also received enquires from landholders in various NRM regions across Australia who are keen to undertake rabbit control but have not been able to find relevant assistance or information from their regional board or authority to do so. This situation is both disheartening for landholders interested in dealing with the problem and a 'way out' for those avoiding it.

ToR 4: *The need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level.*

As mentioned previously, RFA is concerned that complacency among many land managers, both government and private, with respect to rabbit control following RHD coupled with increasing rabbit numbers will lead ultimately to a crisis. We believe that

this is already starting to occur in some localities. The rabbit problem is not neatly defined according to landholder boundaries and cooperation and communication between management tenures is required for effective control programs. Government environmental agencies should also work closely with agricultural agencies to maximise the value of rabbit control for each land use, be it of conservation or agricultural value.

RFA is very supportive of the National Rabbit Management Advisory Group, a recent initiative of Meat & Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation, and their proposal for the Commonwealth to establish a Biological Control Centre to develop new tools for rabbit control in Australia. Yet along with RFA, it seems to be largely alone and with limited resources in attempting to deal with an increasingly threatening problem. The risk of an explosion in the wild rabbit population should be given greater recognition in NRM Standing Committee and Ministerial Council forums.

ToR 5: *the capacity of regional NRM groups, catchment management organisations and other national conservation networks to engage land managers, resource users and the wider community to deliver on-the-ground NRM outcomes as a result of the recent changes to funding arrangements under the Caring for our Country program.*

Improving community understanding of and involvement in pest animals and their management is an ongoing challenge that requires resolution. For example, RFA considers that the general belief that RHD has solved the rabbit problem in Australia contributed to a reduction in rabbit R&D funding, control activities and government commitment.

The increased community awareness of animal welfare and concerns with new technology places a further imperative for the community to be exposed to and possibly become involved in informed debate on these issues and the need for rabbit control to ensure that acceptable control strategies are developed.

ToR 6: *the extent to which the Caring for our Country program represents a comprehensive approach to meeting Australia's future NRM needs*

The effectiveness of this new program still remains to be tested and yet presents an opportunity for leadership at a national level for a problem that clearly requires action from the three spheres of government coupled with support from the R&D sector.

Closing

RFA welcomes the Senate Standing Committee on this Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges Inquiry and looks forward to the outcomes. We would be pleased to discuss further any issues related to rabbits, if required.

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