

The case for a National Rabbit Management Coordinator

Summary Discussion Paper

Introduction

Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia proposes to develop a Business Case as a catalyst for the appointment of a National Rabbit Management Coordinator, promoting the wider application of science-based rabbit control techniques to effectively manage wild rabbits in Australia. The position would operate in conjunction with the National Coordinators for feral cats and foxes, feral deer, feral pigs and wild dogs to achieve broader goals of landscape recovery and resilience.

A Discussion Paper sets out the issues and seeks feedback on the level of support for such a position and the most appropriate ways for it to operate. This document presents a Summary of that Paper.

Summary

Introduction

Wild European rabbits have caused great harm to Australian landscapes, damaging natural ecosystems, primary production, and urban and peri-urban areas alike across the southern two-thirds of Australia.

Well-researched biological controls have significantly reduced rabbit numbers in Australia and are now crucial to effective rabbit control, but they are not sufficient on their own to reduce rabbit populations to levels that are not a risk to the environment.

To effectively control rabbits, land managers need to use additional physical and chemical means to take advantage of the gains generated by biocontrols. A good range of technical rabbit control solutions exist, but over-reliance on biocontrols has meant they are not being applied as widely or as well as required. There are also some situations where new control options are needed, and preparedness is required in case the effectiveness of existing rabbit biocontrols wanes over time.

Two major challenges to the long-term management of wild European rabbits in Australia are:

- optimising the effectiveness of biocontrols through greater effort in other forms of rabbit control
- ensuring there is a constant stream of research so new biocontrols are available as required, as they are the only effective broadscale control available to date and it takes a decade or more for their development and testing.

A National Rabbit Management Coordinator would be an important element in stimulating wider and more effective application of current technologies and provide a link between researchers and managers to assist the development and application of better control techniques.

Control options

Myxomatosis was the first rabbit biocontrol in Australia. Its introduction in the 1950s resulted in a dramatic reduction in rabbit numbers. Since then, a sequence of population recovery phases have been truncated by new biocontrols; with the most recent being the arrival of calicivirus strain RHDV2 nearly a decade ago. That history illustrates that the lasting effectiveness of biocontrols should not be taken for granted and that rabbit populations could soon return to pre-calici densities if the existing biocontrols become less effective. The more contained rabbit populations are, the less risk there is of biocontrols and rabbits quickly co-evolving to reduce the effectiveness of existing biocontrols.

Decades of experience in rabbit control and evolving technologies mean that there are very effective rabbit control techniques available, and skill in their application, to supplement biocontrols. Well-planned control programs that include warren destruction provide lasting benefit and a very positive return on investment. The problem is that much of that knowledge is ebbing away and is no longer widely applied.



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Recent analysis by ABARES supports anecdotal observations that many attempts at rabbit control are not applying recommended practices and hence have only limited success. The studies report that nearly 25% of Australian land managers commit some funds to rabbit control, but of them only 24% think they've been effective (Stenekes *et al.*, 2023). The successful programs generate up to a 6:1 return on investment through reductions in production losses due to rabbits (Hafi *et al.*, 2023).

Additionally, new control options are still needed for extensive (outback) areas where existing physical and chemical controls are very costly due to the sheer size of properties, and in highly sensitive environments where traditional techniques may have reduced applicability (such as urban and peri-urban areas and sites of conservation or cultural heritage significance). More research and development is needed, and it should occur in collaboration with rabbit managers so they can share their insights and guide researchers to priority needs.

Complacency

The broad success of biological controls has resulted in rabbits often being overlooked as a pest, being under-recognised and under-rated and not seen as warranting routine management or investment. A level of complacency about rabbits is apparent from land managers through to governments, often resulting in rabbits being ignored until there are local outbreaks that simply cannot be overlooked, but by then it's often too late for efficient and effective control.

Re-engaging, re-invigorating and upskilling land managers in rabbit control is considered a top priority by many rabbit program administrators, and the development and promotion of clear, consistent messaging is paramount to that end.

Communication & coordination

A common feature across much of the country is the lack of opportunities for those managing rabbit control programs to communicate with each other. There are no effective means for isolated rabbit program managers across Australia to be aware of each other, let alone communicate and share ideas and learnings to lead effective, proactive rabbit control programs.

The fragmented application of best practice rabbit control at regional and state levels is a consequence of fractured communication. Inadequate communication across wide areas and between national, state and regional levels risks sub-optimal coordination and outcomes should national collaboration be required, such as for the release of a new biocontrol.

There are structures in place for communication and collaboration on policy responses to pest and biosecurity issues of national significance covering state and national levels, but little that is specific to proactive rabbit management. Strategies and programs to which rabbit management could contribute could be better linked between federal, state and regional levels if resources such as a National Rabbit Management Coordinator and National Rabbit Action Plan were in place.

Furthermore, there is no national guidance on research priorities for rabbit control that has good engagement with the disparate bodies contributing new knowledge, and with networks that may be a conduit between research and practice. An important element is commitment to the long-term monitoring and associated research required to track rabbit populations and the performance of biocontrols across Australia as an early-warning of waning effectiveness from current options.

Landscape outcomes

Achieving goals such as being 'Nature Positive' and 'threat abatement' require whole-of-landscape approaches, including integrated pest control that would, for example, link rabbit, feral cat and weed control. Expertise in rabbit management is a necessary input to the development of relevant plans and strategies but is often absent.



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The pervasive nature of rabbits and the harm they cause, disrupting whole ecosystems and affecting landscape function, mean that a broad cross-section of society benefits from rabbit control.



Image: G Schulz, 1991

National coordination

The issues presented in this Discussion Paper suggest that rabbits are under-rated as a pest in regional and peri-urban landscapes, posing a risk to longer term resilience and recovery. The issues could be addressed by a National Rabbit Management Coordinator and National Rabbit Action Plan. The National Coordinator model is being effectively used for wild dogs, feral cats and foxes, feral deer and feral pigs, and their success illustrates the benefits of national coordination for vertebrate pest management.

The main purpose of a National Rabbit Management Coordinator would be to raise the profile of rabbits and re-engage and invigorate land managers, while stimulating the provision of necessary training and support so existing rabbit control techniques were applied more widely and more effectively.

A National Coordinator would, by definition, coordinate. Regardless of the skill and effort shown by the coordinator, if there aren't other resources and willing stakeholders to work with, expectations for the position will not be achieved. It is proposed that, regardless of where the funds come from, the model for a National Rabbit Management Coordinator and Action Plan should be a collaborative one with:

- secure long-term funding – ideally a rolling, annually renewed five-year budget
- investors 'buying in' to a package where they bring funds and in-kind support, such as commitments to work with the National Coordinator and provide operational contacts for them.

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Feedback

Your feedback on this document will help determine the path taken to promote the appointment of a National Rabbit Management Coordinator and development of a National Rabbit Action Plan, and the development of Business Case to attract investment to support the position.

Discussion Points

We invite your feedback on matters raised in this Discussion Paper.

- Are rabbits over-looked and under-rated as a threat to healthy landscapes and, if so, how can the profile of rabbit issues be raised?
- Is there a need for more knowledge, skills and training in rabbit control practices for land managers and, if so, how could these needs be best addressed?
- Could the management of rabbits be improved by better training and information sharing between program managers and, if so, how could that be achieved?
- How can the profile of rabbit issues be raised to lift general levels of awareness?
- Is there a need for clearer national leadership in rabbit management and, if so, how could it be provided? Would a National Rabbit Action Plan and National Coordinator assist?
- How could better links be established between federal, state and regional plans and programs regarding rabbit control, as part of broader environmental and regional resilience programs?
- Would there be value in better monitoring rabbit distribution and abundance and the performance of biocontrols in Australia and, if so, how might that be achieved?
- Is it important for rabbit researchers to communicate with each other and, if so, how might that be facilitated?
- Who should contribute to the cost of better rabbit control and coordination in Australia, and how should their contributions be made?
- If a National Rabbit Management Coordinator is appointed, what are the most important principles to guide the establishment and governance of the role, and what should be their main roles?
- Are there any other matters you would like to raise regarding issues raised in this paper?

Further Contact

If you would like to be kept informed of progress in the development of a Business Case and the appointment of a National Rabbit Management Coordinator, please provide your Contact Details:

First Name: Surname:

Organisation:

Email:

Feedback

Please provide any feedback regarding the Discussion Points or letters of support to Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia by COB Friday, **23 February 2024**.

Email to: exec@rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au or Post to: Chairman, PO Box 145, Collinswood. SA. 5081

