

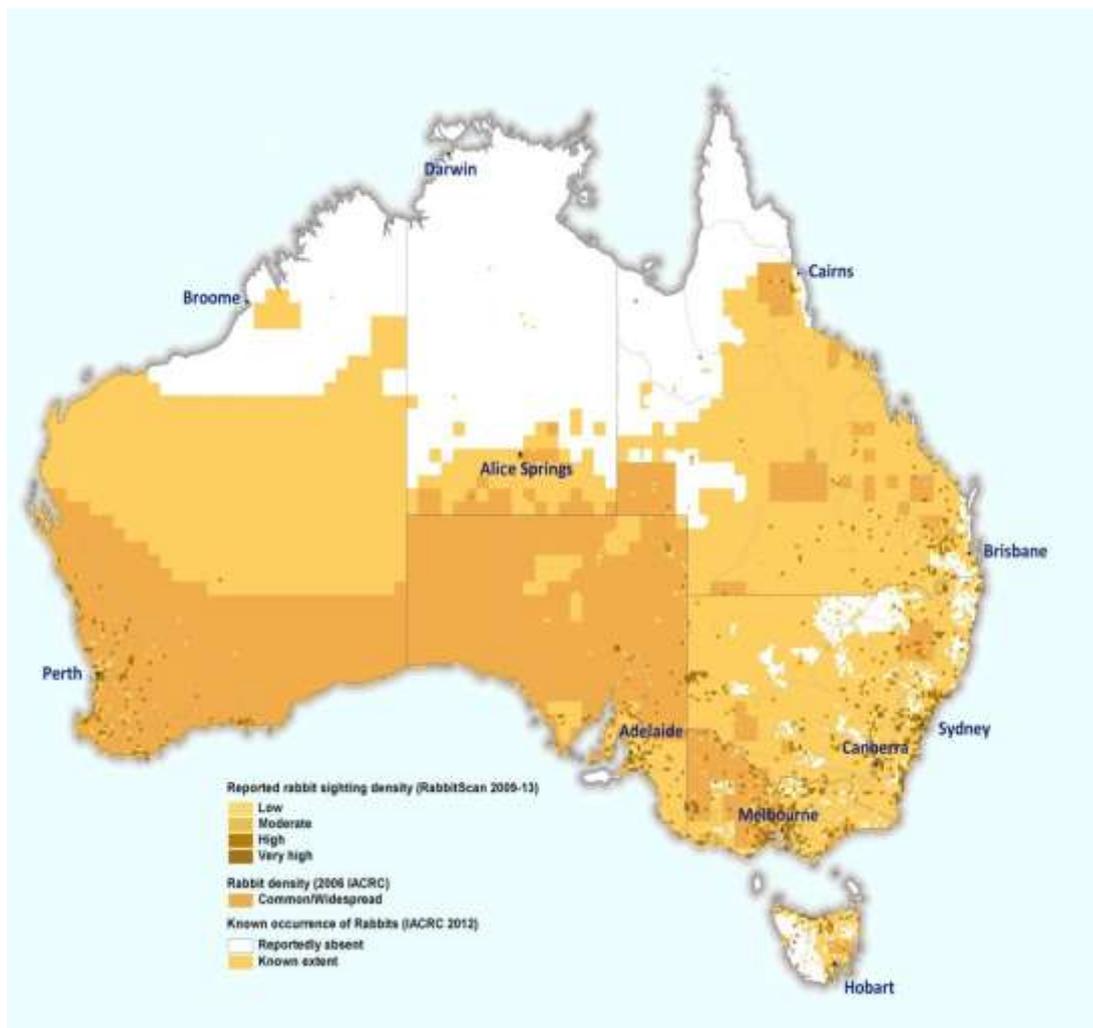


Management of Feral European Rabbit- Compiled by Kaye Rodden Feb 2020

The control of feral rabbits is quite pertinent to the community in the Hills as it is from close to here over 150 years ago that the Australian rabbit plague was launched!

In 1959 13 pairs of European rabbits were released at Barwon Park near Winchelsea for game hunting. Within 70 years these rabbits had dominated 2/3rds of the Australian continent, which is the fastest rate of any colonising mammal in the world. Feral rabbits are very suited to the Australian Mediterranean climate and under these conditions “procreate with uncontrollable velocity”! One pair of mating rabbits can produce 200 offspring in 18 months.

Geographic spread of Feral rabbits in Australia.



Legal Responsibility

In Victoria feral or wild populations of European rabbits (*Orytolagus cuniculus*) are declared as established pest animals under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* .

And the Barrabool Hills rabbit baiting program is just one of a number of control measures that are recommended to help landholders fulfil **their legal responsibility “to take all reasonable steps to prevent the spread of, and as far as possible eradicate, established pest animals from their land”**, as outlined in this Act.



Wild European Rabbits are one of Australia's most serious pest animals. Because they are well suited to Australian conditions and breed prolifically. They :

- destroy pasture, crops and plant communities impacting on agriculture and the environment, costing the community 100's of millions of dollars a year.
- cause soil erosion and associated sedimentation of waterways;
- compete with native fauna for food and habitat; and
- directly impact on the survival of 304 threatened Australian Species.



It is this last point which can also impose additional legal responsibilities on landholders to control rabbits. **Australian landholders are legally obliged to protect and manage nationally threatened species and ecological communities as defined by the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act), which is the**

Australian Government's central piece of environmental legislation.

Rabbit Control

Effective rabbit control is achieved by using a combination of control measures, not just one. There is no one quick-fix solution. Land owners must be more persistent than the rabbits!

Effective rabbit management utilises all the available control measures that are feasible and available on a particular property. Every rabbit should be exposed to as many control measures as possible. The aim is to make the property a rabbit hostile environment.

The order in which control measures are implemented is important to maximise the effectiveness of the control program, ideally follow this sequence of control:

- Allow biological control and natural mortality to reduce the rabbit population.
- Bait to reduce numbers prior to ripping if numbers are still high
- Remove harbour and destroy warrens (ie. ripping).



- Follow up with fumigation and further warren destruction.



- Be persistent, remain vigilant and monitor regularly.

LETTERS**DON'T TAKE THE BAIT**

THE COGG decision to “declare war” on rabbits is no understatement.

No less than 12 public reserves and parks have been targeted for baiting using Pindone, known around the world as one of the cruelest, most painful ways to die.

Affected animals die slowly and painfully as they bleed out through their joints and orifices.

If these baiting regimens are so successful, why do we continue to bait the same areas year after year? The answer, as pointed out in research by academics such as Professors Arian Wallach and Adam O’Niell, is that baiting only creates a vacuum that surviving animals then seek to fill in even greater numbers or, worse, an unwelcome invasive predator moves into.

Either way, the threat to natives from direct poisoning — in this particular case birds are at great risk because carrot baits are used — and small carnivores and scavenging species through secondary contamination is too great to dismiss. Especially when alternatives such as bait sterilisation can be used.

I question whether adequate resources are being allocated in the post-baiting period. The enormous number of baits over such a large spread of areas will require hundreds of registered pest controllers.

CoGG cannot, with any real certainty, guarantee the public that no unused baits or carcasses will be left behind.

So the public, rightly, has no confidence in their ability to control this highly offensive poison.

Andy Meddick,
Animal Justice Party candidate for
Corangamite

The Ethics of Rabbit Control

There is currently a growing campaign by animal rights organisations and their spokespeople in the region to re-evaluate the use of some of the control measures that are being used to manage feral rabbit populations – in the name of humaneness (see letter to editor from 12th Feb Geelong Advertiser). This campaign specifically mentions the use of pindone, its humaneness and threat to non target species and the lack of investment in follow up control processes.

I think it is important here to have some of the facts.

- In Australia, feral rabbits are themselves a significant and proven threat to native animals and plants, including over 300 endangered flora and fauna. They denude landscapes causing native herbivores to die from starvation!
- It is the legal responsibility of land owners, both public and private to control rabbits on their land.
- Rabbits know no boundaries, and it takes only one landholder to ignore their responsibility and it impacts on all their neighbours, causing enormous community concern.
- The most humane way of destroying a feral rabbit is by a head shot. This option however is not available to the majority of the landholders in the Barrabool Hills, so we need to consider an alternative.
- Pindone is a poison and it is used to destroy a pest animal. In its diluted form, as found on the laced carrots, it does not require a special permit (ACUP) to use. It is effective because it has minimal off target impact, as it requires repetitive and cumulative ingestion. The rabbits almost always die in their burrows after gorging themselves on repeat feeds of poisoned carrots. There is also a readily accessible antidote, Vitamin K, for pindone.
- If the baiting is carried out in accordance with our guidelines, and spread in the evening and excess disposed of first thing in the morning, there is little threat if any to birds. Any larger animals would have to eat all the bait over the three baiting periods to be impacted, because of their bigger body mass.
- 1080 is another poison used to destroy feral rabbits. It is highly toxic and requires an ACUP to handle in any form. It is said to be a more “humane” poison as it kills the animals instantly, however this means the carcasses need to be retrieved immediately and destroyed otherwise they are scavenged by other animals, and there is a significant threat to off target poisoning. Even very small amounts of bait are very toxic to other animals.
- In our area, which has a high human (and domestic animal) population density, we cannot use 1080, because of the off target threat.
- Poisoning rabbits we stress is only a part of an “integrated program” to control feral rabbits, as specified above, and is useless on its own!

COMMENT

There are many feral animals in Australia that are wreaking havoc on native plants and animals. One wonders whether a similar campaign is being levelled at the national campaign to control the less cuddly cane toad or the European carp, pictured below!



References

<http://www.pestsmart.org.au/animal-welfare/humaneness-assessment/rabbit/>

Draft: Australian Government Department of the Environment

Background document: Threat abatement plan for competition and land degradation by rabbits - 2015

<http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/pests-diseases-and-weeds/pest-animals/invasive-animal-management/established-invasive-animals/integrated-rabbit-control-for-rural-and-natural-landscapes>