

Current Issues in Rabbit Control

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Prior to discussing current issues in rabbit control, I remind delegates that:

- after the establishment of rabbit calicivirus (RCV) in Australia, the European rabbit remains one of the most abundant vertebrate pests of primary industries and still causes irreversible damage to natural ecosystems, and that
- the management of rabbits:
 - is a joint responsibility of land managers (agriculture and conservation), industry, and governments;
 - is a dynamic process that can be influenced greatly by changes in the rabbit, itself, agricultural practices and other land use, farm profitability, public expectations and political persuasions;
 - has paralleled the entomologists' highly-regarded concept of integrated pest management during the last 50 years by successfully integrating physical, chemical and biological control tactics (a worldwide first for a vertebrate pest);
 - is an ongoing process that requires a long-term view in the continuing development and application of management strategies.

The current issues facing the control of rabbits in Australia include:

Funding for research and development: rabbits have disappeared from public view and there is a widespread belief that the rabbit problem has been solved with RCV. The residual problems with rabbits need to be defined to nurture industry and political will to fund further work on rabbit control tactics and strategies. Ecologists need to work with economists to provide economic arguments in addition to environmental arguments to provide tangible evidence to governments and industry to justify this support. Identification of the clients/beneficiaries of rabbit control and the groups/people to champion its cause is also required.

Requirement for further rabbit control tactics: novel control tactics and new biological control agents are required to compliment the success of RCV in arid zones and to improve levels of control in high rainfall areas where RCV has been less effective. Further ecological studies are also required to understand, post-RCV, the relationships between the rabbit and components of the different types of environments where it occurs. In particular, information is required to define the characteristics of new biological control agents and to maximise the benefits from developing and applying any new control tactics in conjunction with RCV.

Acceptance of novel control tactics and management strategies: robust risk analysis processes, including animal welfare issues, are necessary to gain regulatory, industry, land manager and public acceptance of novel tactics, eg virally vectored immunocontraception. New management strategies need to be practical, acceptable and profitable, whether for use in controlling rabbits in agricultural or natural ecosystems.

Implementation of current management strategies: land managers should be encouraged to apply traditional control tactics to enhance the effectiveness of RCV.

Reliance on 1080 for rabbit control: further research may be needed to meet the requirements of the National Registration Authority for continued registration of 1080. Additional target-specific and humane toxicants to integrate with other control tactics are also needed as a precaution against the possible loss of registration or discontinued production of 1080.

Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of rabbit control: standard national methods and their use are required to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of rabbit control strategies and the influence of changing circumstances, eg increased peri-urban pressures, to redefine goals, where necessary.

Speakers at this Forum will address these issues in more detail, and the Forum is timely to advance the development of a national strategy for rabbit management. Such a strategy should take into account international conventions and agreements on biodiversity and trade, as well as research priorities, management strategies, roles and responsibilities of agencies and land managers and the different cultural views in Australia, *vis-à-vis* rabbits being an undesirable or desirable species. Perhaps, the momentum of this Forum should be progressed through a working group.

The outcomes from the Forum also offer an opportunity to inform politicians, governments, industry, land managers and the public of the need for and value of continuing rabbit research and control — an issue that is critical for future successes in rabbit control.