

A National Strategy for Rabbit Control

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The escape of rabbit calicivirus (RCD) from Wardang Island, South Australia, in 1995 dramatically changed the picture of rabbit infestations across Australia. The disease greatly reduced rabbit numbers in inland Australia and significantly reduced rabbit populations in most other areas with only a few exceptions in moister coastal areas. At that time, landholders in many areas also took advantage of government schemes such as Natural Heritage Trust funding, “West 2000” or specific rabbit control schemes like “Rabbit Buster” to reduce the chance that rabbits could eventually make a comeback.

However, despite this progress rabbit control work in Australia has now reached a crossroad! Do we simply say that we have done enough work to control rabbits or do we push ahead to make sure that rabbits never again return to former levels? It is worth asking:

- What has been achieved by rabbit calicivirus?
- What are the remaining problems?
- What land use or industries do these residual rabbit populations most affect?
- What extra work needs to be done and who should do it?

To work through these questions, I draw on results of a recent questionnaire survey of rangers from Rural Lands Protection Boards (RLPBs) across New South Wales. The results showed that the timing of outbreaks of RCD varies from one part of the State to another. In southern areas the disease is most conspicuous in winter while in the extreme northeast of the State, outbreaks are most commonly seen in summer. By contrast, myxomatosis retains a pattern of summer outbreaks statewide.

It has been largely in the southern areas of NSW that rabbit calicivirus has given the best results. The highest populations of rabbits now remaining are found in the northern areas of the State. The most extensive rabbit problems are still found in pastoral lands but rabbits should not be thought of as an exclusively agricultural problem. In many Board areas, requests for assistance came from people living in country towns or those who have taken up “rural living” and had rabbits damaging gardens and other amenities. Rabbits in these situations are difficult to deal with because methods developed for use on large farms, such as 1080 poisoning or warren ripping are not always appropriate.

To summarise, the survey indicated that RCD has been a useful biological control agent and has also been a catalyst for further rabbit control programs in many areas. We also know where the residual rabbit problems occur and this provides a basis for strategies for future control. In pastoral areas, options for further control may include additional schemes like “West 2000” to encourage warren ripping. However, more thought needs to be given to the rabbit problem in semi-rural areas, otherwise we could end up winning the war in the paddocks but losing it in the suburbs! There seem to be several ways to approach the problem. Closer cooperation and planning between RLPBs and local government is clearly important but there is also an urgent need to investigate acceptable, efficient methods for removing rabbits from small farms and gardens. Indeed, many rangers thought that a rabbit-specific biological control agent delivered on bait should be considered for these semi-urban areas.

Given the usefulness of questionnaire results so far it is intended that the survey will be extended State by State to develop a wider national perspective on the remaining “post-RCD” rabbit problem. In turn, we should then be able to move towards a clear national strategy for dealing with, and insuring ourselves against, a comeback of Australia’s “No. 1 pest”.