

Overview of Research Investment in Rabbit Control

Tony Peacock and Tony Arthur
Pest Animal Control Cooperative Research Centre

Bomford and Hart (in press) estimate research investment in rabbit control to be around \$5m annually in the post-RHD era in Australia (based on figures supplied by other agencies). Together with State and producer costs of an estimated \$20m annually, the current 'best guess' estimate for rabbit control Australia-wide is around \$25m annually. The largest sources of research funding are Federal, through the Pest Animal Control Cooperative Research Centre and the National Heritage Trust programs managed by Environment Australia and the Bureau of Rural Sciences.

The annual cost of rabbit damage to Australia is estimated to be in the region of at least \$200m (Bomford and Hart, in press) and perhaps as high as \$600m (Acil Economics, 1996).

For agricultural industries in Australia, good research policy would indicate a research quantum in the region of 0.5 to 1.0% of the Gross Value of Production (GVP) generally provides attractive returns. However, it is obviously not good policy to consider a quantum investment (which is virtually always constrained by equally worthy issues) without consideration of the potential gains available ('attractiveness') and the likelihood of success ('feasibility'). An additional important criterion for consideration is the degree of coordination of research, both within Australia and internationally.

Considering these factors subjectively, a picture may be gained as follows:

Is rabbit research 'attractive'?

Maximum possible benefit: perhaps \$100-\$500m pa

Ability to capture benefits: variable, but say moderate – high.

Conclusion: rabbit research remains moderately-highly attractive

Is rabbit research 'feasible'?

Will any gains be incremental or fundamental? Highly dependent on the type of research, but there have been two instances of fundamental gains (myxo and RHD).

Are people and facilities of sufficiently high quality? Yes, but critical mass is an issue.

Conclusion: rabbit research is moderately-highly feasible

Is rabbit research well coordinated?

There is probably a reasonable level of coordination at governmental level through the Vertebrate Pest Committee. However, coordination is difficult when very small research investments are at stake (20-30% of full time equivalents for example). Overall, research is quite fragmented, especially given that the largest single investment (the Pest Animal Control CRC) has not really been a player in the national scene to date.

If one accepts that rabbit research in Australia is still an attractive and feasible prospect, further research investment is warranted. However, as a prelude to greater research investment, there is a need for researchers to demonstrate a strong desire and ability to collaborate and coordinate, and an ability to quickly translate research gains to the field.

References

- Acil Economics and Policy Pty Ltd 1996. The economic importance of rabbits on agricultural production in Australia. Report prepared for the International Wool Secretariat.
- Bomford, M. and Hart, Q. (in press). Non-indigenous vertebrates in Australia. In Pimental, D. (ed.) *Environmental and Economic Costs of Alien Plant, Animal, and Microbe Invasions*. CRC Press.