

## Industry Perspective on Rabbits — What are the Main Problems?

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We are an industry group involved in both the research and application of technology for pest animal control, thus our perspective is necessarily focused on outcomes that are desired by the landholders. In this paper we have attempted to steer away from the minutia of technical deficiencies, to focus more closely at what we perceive as ‘structural problems’ of attitude and approach that may limit our future national endeavors to maintain adequate control, or even eliminate, the rabbit problem in Australia. This paper does not pretend to present a complete list of problems or an exclusive list of potential solutions to those problems identified. However, the solutions suggested, for the most part, do not require great expenditures since they relate to improved communication, cooperation and focus in the short to medium term. The immediate solutions do not require major new technology or infrastructure. This is not surprising given that one of the main tenants of this paper is that we have a lot of good technology that lacks appropriate application, as distinct from a shortage of appropriate technology.

Before raising problems, it is appropriate that we first rejoice in the ‘biological breathing space’ afforded to the nation by release of the myxoma virus some half a century ago. We can acknowledge the importance of the achievement and the pioneering scientific spirit of those who took the risk at the time. However, though undoubtedly the most successful rabbit control technique so far released, myxoma, like all other available or perhaps even proposed techniques, would fail the 21<sup>st</sup> century *test for perfection* for efficacy, reliability, safety and humaneness as a solution for rabbits. All techniques have their deficiencies and risks but, for the most part, each technique may be applied appropriately where the *balance of acceptable risk* is in favour of use, and provided the overall result of application is positive compared to the risk of doing nothing. Moreover, there are opportunities for greater integration of available individual options (chemical, biological and physical) and for better extension about their proper integrated use, even though no individual option is perfect in isolation.

While encouraging a more effective adoption, we must also be aware of the risks of derailment of any component of the suite of control options, or potential control options, by vested interest groups who distract the agenda or promulgate misleading or inaccurate information. Such processes place additional burdens on regulators and reviewers who must have the skill to sort and assimilate divergent inputs. These regulators also have a challenge to establish a more unified approach to chemical regulation across state boundaries and to support and encourage a move towards improved standards in respect to all options and across all jurisdictions.

We must also move away from reactive management of pests such as rabbits and avoid the tendency to decrease effort when pest numbers are low. This reactive approach leads to the traditional boom-bust cycle of infestation and damage and does not adequately alleviate the longer-term aspects of environmental damage by persistent low infestations or periodic plagues. A corollary of this approach is that programs need to be sustained long term and that planning must exceed the traditional government departmental funding cycles of only 3 to 5 years.

Finally, there must be a redistribution of effort slightly away from research and a little more in favour of the extension and application of existing knowledge. This is to ensure that research findings do find an application. Hopefully, with a commercially focused delivery phase, as can be achieved with increased participation of industry groups in the process, there may be an opportunity for further technology changes and extension efforts to be subsidised by both the public and private sectors.