

Rabbit Control Issues for Farmers

Jonathan Tischler
Banongill Station Victoria

As the manager of Banongill Station, a 6000ha grazing property in the Skipton district of Western Victoria, I have had to deal with a chronic rabbit problem where rabbits had become entrenched in volcanic stony rise country. Banongill consists of 1/3 arable plains, 2/3 non-arable stony rises, which has had a history of rabbit infestation dating back 150 years. Since that time, they have turned a native perennial grassland with scattered light timber into a moonscape, dominated by annual grasses and broadleaved weeds, and substantially fewer trees. Amongst this, we have been trying to run a grazing business, producing mainly wool and beef, but development has been severely restricted by rabbit numbers. Permanent rabbiters, shooters, and baiting netted areas reduced numbers, but only since the outbreak of calicivirus in 1996, have we got on top of the problem and increased stocking rates in stony country by 25%, assisted by large scale 1080 baiting campaigns.

Main issues for landholders

Cost: the purpose of any farm business is (or should be) to produce as much as you can off a given area of land without impairing the future productivity of the land. Rabbits present a serious threat to a farm's viability in terms of the:

- direct cost of control (fixed expense)
- opportunity cost of lost production
- environmental cost, due to overgrazing, erosion, and decline of perennial plants
- self-esteem of the landholder, when you see the scale of the problem every day

Co-operation with neighbouring landholders: essential for the success of any pest control program, as their problem is your problem too. Coordination of control activities like baiting and ripping are essential, as is clean-up work in following years.

What are the options for the future? Is there another agent for biological control? We are still learning about the behaviour of RCD but still find occasional dead rabbits, much to our relief. However, best to live in the present, and throw all we have available at the problem (1080, ripping, fumigating), as we know we can access these tools.

Addressing the next priorities: once we have succeeded with rabbits, don't dwell on success, but use experience to tackle next pest of economic significance – the fox. Numbers of foxes have increased noticeably, and are credited with taking 10 to 15% of newborn lambs in Western Victoria. Increased areas under forest are providing ideal breeding ground for foxes.

Priorities for land management for a grazing business:

- rabbit control
- water development
- pasture development
- fox control
- tree establishment or preservation
- improved grazing techniques

These are really one collective problem, but as 8 rabbits can eat the equivalent of 1 sheep, the rabbits have always taken more than their fair share of the feed, especially as they graze so much closer to the crown of a plant than sheep. Having eliminated 99% of the original rabbit number, we can now allocate resources to other more urgent priorities, in the quest to increase our production further. We are now working on a major water reticulation scheme, which is incorporated with a substantial fencing program to better manage our livestock rotational grazing, and have planted 35,000 trees since 1997 in a quest to heal the scars created by the rabbits. The rewards are now financial, aesthetic, and in the improvement of self esteem.