

Summary of Discussion – Session 1

Current issues for rabbit control

The five speakers who outlined the current issues in rabbit control were selected from very different backgrounds to enable the forum to consider the diversity of rabbit management problems and how they are being tackled.

Peter Allen (Pest Animal Control CRC) outlined the broad range of rabbit control problems and the later speakers provided detailed accounts of specific issues. Jonathan Tischler (Banongill Station Victoria) spoke from the perspective of a wool-producer and Chris Holden (Department of Environment and Heritage SA) provided an example of conservation issues. Linton Staples (Animal Control Technologies) discussed rabbit control from his perspective as director of a pest control company. Leigh Dennis (Department of Natural Resources and Environment Victoria) discussed administrative issues including the development of State policy to facilitate rabbit control. Their talks highlighted key problems for primary industries, conservation, business and public administration.

The questions and general discussion generated by these talks raised issues that clearly need further thought. For example, one participant asked whether, in the aftermath of rabbit calicivirus disease, we really understand how lower rabbit numbers are affecting feral cat or weed populations? This is a major management issue and fundamental for future work. Continued monitoring of pest populations, as outlined by Chris Holden, should help to answer these questions over time.

A similar question was asked about the impact of lower rabbit numbers on the sheep and wool industry. Although rabbit control enables an increase in sheep production, is a more sustainable production or different land use also possible? Jonathan Tischler's obvious interest in using rabbit control as a first step towards the re-establishment of perennial native pastures and the planting of trees clearly indicated that the wider issue of sustainability is being addressed.

Two of the speakers argued that, with low rabbit numbers in the wake of rabbit calicivirus, the opportunity should be taken to maintain or increase rabbit control programs to reduce rabbits to even lower levels. To draw this point out for scrutiny, one questioner then asked why low rabbit numbers were considered to be an opportunity for renewed action rather than being a measure of success? Clearly, if further action is needed we must provide clear evidence to show why this is so!

Although Peter Allen referred to rabbit control in general as a good example of integrated pest management, this was not apparently a universally held view. Although rabbit control is well integrated in terms of chemical and physical control, it was suggested that more needs to be done to integrate and optimise the use of biological control by careful use of other applied controls such as poisoning.

Some progress was also made in considering the organisation of future rabbit management. Suggestions included the setting of political, technical and environmental objectives, the role of the community (e.g. Landcare groups) and the need for support through legislation and funding. Provision of good information on achievements in rabbit management was considered essential for keeping the wider community informed and maintaining support for future work.

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