

## Summary of Discussion – Session 4

### *Perspectives and reflections*

The forum confirmed that despite apparent gains, rabbits still remain a problem in many areas and there is great support within farming communities and industries for continued rabbit control. The importance of rabbit control in conservation has also been underplayed.

The economic and environmental benefits of fewer rabbits have not been put forward clearly enough to convince politicians and bureaucrats or the general public of the need to maintain the momentum of programs to reduce the damage caused by rabbits.

This is even more of a problem when it is realised that with two biological control methods and a range of conventional control methods, there is now a window of opportunity to eliminate rabbits, not just control them, over extensive areas. Yet, presumably because rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD), also known as calicivirus, is thought to have solved the problem, interest in rabbit control has fallen. Not only are we failing to drive low rabbit numbers to even lower levels but there is danger of losing knowledgeable field staff and few young people are coming into this field.

Nevertheless, the problems identified do seem to have solutions! It is clearly necessary to have an agreed national objective to continue the fight against the rabbit. Both Commonwealth and State governments must continue to support this general objective although a specialised group or institution could focus the work by setting out national objectives and developing a long-term plan for work. Financial support for this work should not simply come from governments either. Governments certainly have responsibilities for vast areas of land in Australia as well as responsibility for matters of general public good, nevertheless industries and organisations that will benefit from rabbit control should also be expected to contribute.

Quite clearly, the big question of who should take responsibility for an ambitious national program of rabbit management could not be addressed in this particular national forum - that is part of a much larger political process. However, there was clearly a general desire among the participants for more action to be taken on a national scale to ensure that rabbits in Australia never return to the disastrous levels of former years.

It was also recognised that the achievements so far were not the result of short-term research but often decades of work and political debate. Rabbits continue to cause significant environmental damage across large parts of this continent and we largely rely on two viruses to keep them at bay. We cannot afford to wait until rabbits cause such obvious economic and environmental damage that we are stirred into activity again. As a society we should be far-seeing enough to know how to capitalise on our earlier advances.

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At the forum many ideas were put forward that would help develop a strategy towards the 'next fifty years' in rabbit control. They included:

- The encouragement and coordination of rabbit control on a national scale that recognises State legislation and takes into account existing organisations with responsibility for rabbit control;
- That the marketing of such ideas to others interested in rabbit control depends not only on scientific knowledge and expertise but must be clearly linked with the needs of those who have rabbit problems and a lead to obtain funds;
- Given the current lack of long-term commitment to rabbit control, it is important to communicate the importance of rabbits relative to other issues, such as salinity;
- There must be reinforcement of institutional structures, such as the tax deductions already in place, to ensure that rabbit control is carried out;
- It is important to collect information to clearly show the nature of residual rabbit problems, in both environmental and economic terms, so that the general public and industry groups can see the need for action;
- It is important to set targets for rabbit control based on the density of rabbits known to cause damage, or other objectives such as the need for eliminating them from habitats important for conservation;
- The resources necessary to implement new initiatives in rabbit control must be clearly outlined;
- It is important to develop integrated pest management concepts to optimise the use of poisons and other applied controls in the aftermath of rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD);
- The debate on pest control should not only focus on the rabbit but also address the wider issues of sustainable landscapes, including the role of rabbits in supporting damaging predators such as the cat and fox;
- The emerging issue of rabbits on the edges of towns requires new approaches. It is also an opportunity to raise awareness amongst urban populations of the impact of rabbits on natural resources, horticulture and public amenities;
- Different approaches must be developed to deal with rabbit problems on town edges, agricultural problems and problems in pastoral lands;
- Research on biological controls should be continued as these have obvious cost advantages over controls such as poisoning or warren ripping that are more labour intensive; and
- Work on a third biological control agent is required in addition to myxomatosis and rabbit RHD as it would take rabbits a long time to develop genetic resistance to all three diseases.