

## Rabbit Control: Free-feeding before Baiting

Rabbits are habitual feeders and can be shy in trying new feeds, especially if their usual feeds are available. Free feeding gets them used to a new food (oats or carrots), increasing the likelihood of them taking baited feed. Spacing the feeds (e.g. 3 days apart) gives more rabbits sufficient time to become accustomed to the feed.

'Baits' used may be poisons (1080 or Pindone) or biocontrols and biocides (RHDV-K5).

- 1080 is fast acting and toxic in low concentrations.
- Pindone is slow acting (consumption does not cause immediate ill effect), and repeated consumption is required to achieve body concentrations at the level required for full effect.
- Once a rabbit becomes infected after ingesting RHDV-K5 the disease can be spread to susceptible rabbits nearby, however it is best to have as many rabbits ingesting the bait as possible.

For more information on the merits of Pindone versus 1080, and the situations in which they can be used, see '[Rabbit control: 1080 versus pindone](#)' (Agriculture & Food, WA). Regulations may vary between State.

As they work in different ways, different baiting strategies are appropriate for each type of bait but, in all cases, the most important thing is to determine where rabbits are feeding and monitor bait uptake. It saves time and money, and optimises the effectiveness of any baiting program.

- Begin by determining where rabbits are feeding (e.g. a spotlight count), so bait trails are laid in the most useful places. For more information see '[Assessing rabbit abundance](#)' (Rabbit-Free Australia).
- Monitor the consumption of free-feeds and adjust accordingly, e.g. concentrating effort in the most heavily grazed areas, increasing the rate and frequency of application in heavily grazed sites, or not re-laying free-feeds until noticeable amounts have been taken. A trail camera will help confirm that it is rabbits taking the feed.
- Ideally, surveys of rabbit numbers should be undertaken before and after a baiting program to determine whether it has reduced rabbit numbers to the low levels planned for.

Differences in the effect, associated off-target risks, and cost of baits make different free-feed strategies appropriate to each:

- For 1080, by monitoring free-feeds and determining where, and at what rate, to lay baits for maximum uptake it is possible to reduce the total amount of feed (and poison) laid. A common recommendation is for three free-feeds before a poison-dosed trail is laid, but the third free-feed may not be necessary if it is clear where rabbits are feeding most.
- With close monitoring, Pindone may only require a single initial 'free-feed', before the poison is introduced in the next three feeds; allowing it to accumulate to the necessary concentration through consecutive feeds.
- As RHDV-K5 is infectious to other rabbits, very high levels of uptake may not be as important.

A 'One-shot' approach for 1080 baiting has been developed and approved for use in Western Australia, where native animals tolerate 1080 better. A mixture of plain oats and poisoned oats are used.

Standard Operating Procedures are available from [pestSMART](#) for:

- [RHDV-K5](#) SOP
- [1080](#) SOP
- [Pindone](#) SOP

As a final point, it is not the percentage of rabbits killed, but the percentage of rabbits left alive, that is the issue. There may appear to be little difference between killing 90% or 95% of rabbits; but when it comes to the residual populations to be removed, or likely to breed-up over the following year, one remainder is twice the size of the other (10% as opposed to 5%).

Technical Advice: Brian Cooke (University of Canberra), Neil Devanny (Victorian Rabbit Action Network) & Nathan Ring (Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Board).