

Chairman’s Annual Report – 2022-23

Our reason for existence

The Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia is an environmental charity with three mission objectives:

- Support research and researchers,
- raise awareness and understanding, and
- encourage on-ground control measures.

All three contribute to our ultimate objective - to eradicate wild rabbits from Australia.

The European wild rabbit is Australia’s worst vertebrate pest, being widespread and destructive to natural environments and primary production. Rabbits adversely affect over 300 threatened native species, change landscapes, and cause losses of over \$200 million a year to agricultural production. The simple, yet confronting reality is that rabbit activity (breeding, burrowing, and grazing) destroys plant species, displaces native animals, supports fox and cat predation and reduces carbon accumulation. Reducing and changing vegetation, changes every aspect of landscape function.

Grazing and burrowing of invasive rabbits have dramatically degraded Australian landscapes. Rabbit-Free Australia is committed to rebuilding Australian production and conservation landscapes, with the eradication of feral rabbits as a crucial step to that end. The Foundation’s vision is for productive and regenerating landscapes, free of their most notorious vertebrate pest (the European wild rabbit), supporting abundant native plants and wildlife.

Research

Our research portfolio, summarized in the table below, has a good spread of activities. The “Heatwaves” project we funded with Katherine Moseby at Arid Recovery, Roxby Downs has concluded but the body of work is continuing, with follow up work to track more rabbits and bilbies as they respond to increased occurrence of extremely high temperatures. The “Rabbit Impacts on Vegetation” project of Neil Ross (UNSW) has also concluded, providing good evidence of the ongoing role of rabbits in preventing the regeneration of palatable species and the spread of weeds in rangelands. The “Quorum of quolls” project application to the Australian Research Council did not get up last year but received positive reviews that have encouraged a revised application. If this gets funded, it will be a fascinating experiment to see what level of rabbit control enables the re-introduction of species like quolls into the Flinders Ranges.

It is very pleasing to note that our relatively modest investment into the “blue-sky” research of Stephen Frankenberg at University of Melbourne proved catalytic. His research team has expanded significantly, and his recent report indicates that they are making good progress. Wild rabbit embryo cell lines are soon to be used to test the feasibility of splicing in specific genes that can influence reproductive fitness.

Project	Project Officer	Organisation	Budget	Paid	Balance Due
Gene drive	S Frankenberg	Uni Melb	\$16,500	\$11,000	\$5,500
Quorum of quolls	M Jones	U Tas	\$60,000	\$0	\$60,000
LHV-4 Modelling	D Peacock	Uni Adelaide	\$21,000	\$11,000	\$10,000
Baiting trials	A Hams	Bush Heritage	\$17,700	\$10,000	\$7,700
Turretfield tissue library	A Iannella		\$15,700	\$10,000	\$5,700
Website update	A Cotton		\$5,000	\$1,800	\$3,200

As we have done in the last couple of years, the Foundation will put out a call for project proposals in this month with a reminder early in 2024. We have compiled a list of nearly 100 research contacts, and it is pleasing to note the spread of active researchers across Australia. We know however, that rabbit research and knowledgeable researchers can rapidly diminish if adequate funding opportunities are lacking. It is therefore imperative that the Foundation remains active and vocal about the on-going need for rabbit control research and its effective application.

As noted in last year's report, Federal Government block-funding for the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) ceased in June 2023, necessitating a restructure to tightly focused projects based on key outcomes. An extensive consultation process resulted in refocusing of the Centre's proposed research. How much and in what time frame the proposed research gets done will depend on the financial support from the contributing CISS partners.

The CISS National Research and Engagement Plan (attached at the end of this report) was discussed with partners (including our Foundation) as part of the refocusing. It is pleasing to note that an Integrated Rabbit Biocontrol Program (P4) is one of five under the "Sustained reduction of impact of invasive animals". Our contribution to the September workshop included support for the Rabbit Program and for the Genetic Biocontrol Technology Program. In addition, we emphasised the importance of research and actions that focus on the effectiveness of integrated pest management especially at times when pests are most vulnerable e.g., during droughts or after fire. Again, it should be noted that the success of the CISS Plan is entirely dependent on the financial support of partners, including state agencies, research institutions and producer bodies.

Awareness

The need to continuously raise awareness and increase understanding is twofold.

- First, is the critical need to ensure that all land stewards (governments, owners and land users) appreciate that wild rabbits are still present and as destructive as ever.
- Second, we need to promote Rabbit-Free Australia as a focussed organisation that can encourage and catalyse research and its applications to eliminate wild rabbits.

During the last year we have maintained our contact with a wide range of environmental and land management organisations. With guidance from Committee member Craig Magnussen, we have become more aware that Local Government has an increasing involvement with rabbit control often in peri-urban settings. The Local Government Association in Queensland has initiated representation to government seeking further support for more coordinated control and will encourage other State LGA's to follow suite.

A very significant contributor to the identity of Rabbit-Free Australia is our trademarked Easter Bilby. During the year, with pro-bono legal assistance, we have reaffirmed our legal position regarding the trademark. To expand the influence of our trademark Easter Bilby we have successfully engaged with Tom Foristal, Managing Director of Melba's Chocolates, and are very pleased to have now licenced Melba's to market a "Easter Bilby". Melba's have produced and promoted a chocolate bilby for many years and are well known for supporting bilby conservation which will continue, for example through one of our partners, Zoos SA, and the bilby exhibit at Adelaide Zoo. Haigh's, our inaugural and on-going Foundation Sponsor, is very supportive of our efforts to expand the licensing of Easter Bilby to other chocolate manufacturers.

As foreshadowed in last year's report our trademark "Easter Bilby's Friends" is being given life in the form of our first children's picture and story book. The underlying idea is that Easter Bilby champions the cause of all the plants and animals disadvantaged by rabbits. Easter Bilby's Friends will tell the stories of those plants and animals – and the work people are doing to help them.

Our aim is for a series of children's books (one released every year) to tell the stories; supported by a website. Each one will describe the problem, the solution, and how – thanks to Easter Bilby - humans can help. Different stories will be set in different regions of Australia and involve different plants and animals.

The first in the series, “Banjo Frog’s Concert Spectacular”, is with our publisher for a final review. We’re excited and planning an Adelaide launch (Saturday Feb 24, at Hamra Centre Library, West Torrens) and one in the Fleurieu where the book is set (Rapid Bay Primary School, Monday, Feb 26). Peter Day has provided oversight for the project, with excellent support from volunteer project officer Vicki Linton who is now taking the reins. Michael Bollen from Wakefield Press is the publisher, Kristin Martin is the author and Bianca Richardson the illustrator. Vicki and Kristin are already working on ideas for the next book, to be set in the SW of WA, and Vicki will meet people in the region next month to bed down characters and storylines for the book.

At a different level, the Committee resolved to support members presenting at priority national conferences by paying registration fees. Taking our message to stakeholders, we have had a presence at national conferences of the Australian Rangelands Society, Vertebrate Pests and Natural Resources Management. Our Patron Brian Cooke presented at the global conference of the International Society for Ecological Restoration. The 19th Australian Vertebrate Pest Conference is in Sydney in July 2024 – and we need to have a presence there.

On-ground Action

As part of the Foundation developing and promoting a “national conversation” about rabbit control we have had a second virtual Rabbit Control R & D forum held on 8 March 2023. The arrangements were facilitated by the Foundation and CISS. More than 100 participants were registered from across Australia to listen to presentations from Brian Cooke, Katherine Moseby, and Andreas Glanznig (CISS). There continues to be clear enthusiasm for the format and content, and we plan to facilitate a follow up forum in March of 2024.

The Australian Rabbit Managers Network (ARMN), again facilitated by the Foundation and CISS, has had three meetings in the past year. There were about twenty participants, with all states represented along with the Federal Government. The group has shared experiences of successful rabbit control programs, discussed the need for a national rabbit action plan and the need for a national rabbit control coordinator. A more recent meeting reviewed the evidence of the persistence of RHDV2, identified the need for “fact sheets” such as the use of RHDV-K5 and guidelines for release, and the use of free-feeds when bait-laying. From discussion it is obvious that there is little consistency across jurisdictions around monitoring and compliance of rabbit populations. This evident lack of consistency could help stimulate the need for an ongoing population census which will be further considered in coming meetings.

Operations

Members

It is with sadness that we acknowledge the passing of Russ Sinclair. Russ was a devoted researcher at the University of Adelaide. He provided oversight and persistent management of Koonamore Vegetation Reserve in the rangelands north of Yunta. Russ’s legacy is the ongoing maintenance of the rabbit-free reserve and the research based there. The contrasting vegetation condition and images within these sections and outside provides evidence of the degrading effects of rabbits. Such quality information is rare.

Our membership has been maintained over the last year. There are currently just over 90 members, including a new category, “Honorary”, awarded to those volunteering services to the Foundation. There

has been further rationalisation of our membership procedures and fees, together with new membership options, facilitated by better software.

Our Executive Officer and I have recently had discussions with a fund-raising adviser to sharpen up our ideas and approaches for a more effective marketing plan, which we look forward to developing under the guidance of committee member Fiona Krawczyk of Haigh's Chocolates. Topics identified were adding value to the "Friends" books, a sharper focus on donors and priority projects that strengthen our strategic relationships with our key supporters, along with keeping members informed and engaged with successful stories of rabbit control and the resultant production and environmental benefits.

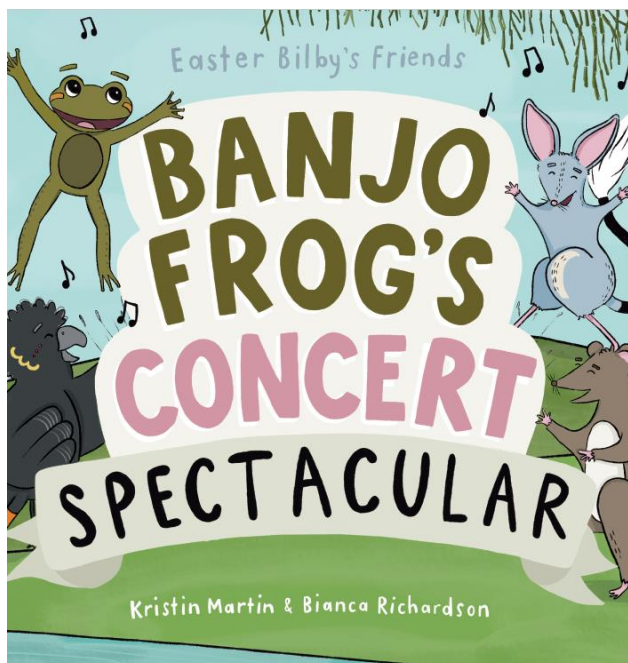
Committee

The Foundation Committee has been considerably strengthened in the past year with members Fiona Krawczyk (Haigh's) and Craig Magnussen (Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Board), Vicki Linton taking on the Easter Bilby's Friends project, and Thomson Geer (legal services) joining Wallace Vroulis Bond (accounting and business advisers) as providers of pro bono professional services.

We have met four times during the past year, through a mixture of hybrid and electronic-video meetings. I sincerely thank all members for their contributions during the last year. It is important to note that my term as Chair and that of Committee member Amy Iannella will be finishing next year. I ask for your assistance in identifying new members who are willing to champion the next few years of the Foundation.

Conclusion

It is my very happy duty to again report that the Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia is in a financially and administratively sound position. The Foundation has significantly raised its profile and is increasingly exerting its influence to fulfil its purpose - to control and ultimately eliminate destructive wild rabbits from Australian landscapes.



Coming Soon: 'Banjo Frog's Concert Spectacular' is due for release in Feb 2024.

CISS NATIONAL RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT & ENGAGEMENT PLAN OUTCOMES

