

Annual Report. 2021-22

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.

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 and resilient communities.

Research

Centre for Invasive Species Solutions

Last year I reported on our increased interaction with the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) in Canberra. As an Associate Member of the Centre, we are well informed about on-going rabbit control research and monitoring and are well placed to raise issues and ideas for collaboration. Topics covered in discussions have included:

- The National Rabbit Database, developed by researchers to track Australian rabbit populations, which is no longer being maintained. We anticipate that questions about Database maintenance and its connection with RabbitScan will be addressed in the next phase of CISS.
- Revision of the Glovebox Guide for Rabbits to better promote integrated rabbit control. This led to a joint project with CISS to develop material for inclusion in the next revision of the Guide.
- Ongoing support for rabbit disease monitoring (including myxomatosis) through RabbitScan, and rabbit virus detection tests to be produced locally, instead of overseas.
- A more comprehensive (and credible) accounting for the cost of rabbits to the environment, infrastructure, communities, and production.

The Foundation also contributed to discussions within CISS resulting in a decision to not pursue registration of RHDV2 as a biocide. It was concluded that the cost of registration and development of a vaccine was not warranted, particularly as V2 is already circulating in wild populations.

Foundation projects

Our research portfolio has expanded with a good spread of activities, from an investment of \$100,000; e.g.

- Gene-drive technology, Melbourne University (Dr Stephen Frankenberg)
- Rabbit impacts on groundcover vegetation, University of NSW (Neil Ross)
- Effects of heatwaves on burrowing mammals, University of NSW (Katherine Moseby)

- Rabbit-baiting trials, Bush Heritage Australia (Alex Hams)
- Herpes virus (LHV-4) modelling, (David Peacock - pending co-contributions)
- International conference attendance (David Peacock)
- Open access research publication (Amy Iannella)

The spread of projects ranges from “blue-sky” exploration of possible rabbit population control with Gene-Drive technology, to connecting with international rabbit control research, to on-ground rabbit ecology, to monitoring the effects of different control methods and of long-term rabbit exclusion on vegetation. A recent proposal from the University of Tasmania aims to quantitatively monitor the effectiveness of extensive rabbit control and re-introduction of quolls into areas of the Flinders Ranges. While the Foundation’s potential contribution is a small amount relative to the total cost of the project, it is seen by the proponents as vital and catalytic for attracting significant government and supporting funding.

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 2023. We have compiled a list of more than 50 potential research contacts and it is pleasing to note the spread of active researchers across Australia. We know however, that rabbit research and the number of 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.

Awareness

As I indicated in my last year’s report, 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.

Technology is continuously providing new means of communication, assisting us in addressing those needs.

Networking

We have continued to contact and engage with numerous environmental and land management organisations such as Darling Downs – Morton Rabbit Board, VRAN, Save the Bilby Fund, Arid Recovery, RabbitScan, Invasive Species Council, Nature Foundation, Bush Heritage and NRM Regions Australia.

As foreshadowed in last year’s report we have been exploring the possibility of expanding the influence of our trademark Easter Bilby with ‘Easter Bilby’s Friends’. The concept is to increase the awareness that controlling rabbits is critical in achieving success in native revegetation and hence the survival of threatened species of native animals, beginning with a series of children’s picture books. To facilitate the “friends” idea we applied for and have received trademark approval for “Easter Bilby’s Friends”. The trademark covers both literature and goods e.g., chocolates, that are connected to the friends concept.

With much advice and learning along the way we have secured a publisher (Wakefield Press) and an author and illustrator who have begun work on producing a children’s book featuring Easter Bilby’s friends, Banjo Frog, Glossy Black Cockatoo and Southern Brown Bandicoot. “They are hungry and tired because the wild rabbits have eaten everything, and they need our help”. The aim is for a book launch at Easter, 2024.

Policy and funding

The Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) is in the final year of its current form. Hence it has been finalising research projects and other activities in addition to lobbying existing partners and the Federal Government for a new life. This is obviously very challenging, particularly with a change of government during the process, but they remain optimistic that a revamped CISS organisation will be supported.

With the change in the Federal Government and CISS's application for re-funding, the Foundation took the opportunity to write to responsible politicians at Federal and State levels, presenting a policy document and alerting them to the on-going need for rabbit control and its research, and presenting a platform of ideas to generate better rabbit control and environmental outcomes. We emphasised the need for:

- Funding of the CISS Rabbit Biocontrol Research and Innovation Plan as a whole,
- Development of a National Rabbit Action Plan and appointment of a National Rabbit Facilitator, and
- Embedding feral animal control (including rabbits) in disaster response strategies.

On-ground Action

Australian Rabbit Mangers Network

Last year the Foundation indicated that it was in the process of developing a “national conversation” about rabbit control. This has now spawned two major developments. The first was a virtual Rabbit Control R & D forum held on 21 March 2022. The arrangements were facilitated by the Foundation and CISS. 183 participants were registered from across Australia. Key researchers presented, questions were posed, and much contemporary information was exchanged. There was clear enthusiasm for the format and content. We are working to present a follow up forum in March of 2023.

In conjunction with CISS, a small working group developed the concept of the Australian Rabbit Managers Network (ARMN). The first virtual meeting, jointly facilitated by the Foundation and CISS, was held on 12 October 2022. There were twenty participants, with all states represented along with two from the Federal Government's environment and agriculture Departments. The group identified four topics of common concern and even at this first meeting there was good information exchange and enthusiasm for making on-going connections. A follow-up meeting will be held in coming months, with the anticipation that this group will become more self-sustaining as helpful connections and trust increases.

Website

Our primary method of achieving influence with improved on-ground practice is through our web presence. With assistance from VRAN plans are in hand to update and improve our website's Control pages. Significantly revamped content for those pages is now largely ready, including links to quality science and science informed commentary on rabbits. Uploading and design is underway. It is part of the ongoing restructuring and improvement of our web site.

Executive Officer Peter, along with Committee Member Amy Iannella, contract programmer Amy Cotton and design associate Anne Burgi continue to do a mountain of work to update and improve our web site presence. A recent successful application for a Non-profits Grant from Microsoft will be very helpful in giving us access to premium software services, even though it requires lots of learning for the operators.

Operations

Members

It is with great sadness that we acknowledge the passing of Greg Mutze during the past year. Greg was an outstanding researcher and a highly valued member of our Foundation. We trust that the implementation of the Greg Mutze Oration associated with our AGM will serve as a suitable reminder of the service that Greg provided to our community.

Our membership numbers (currently 71) have been maintained over the last year. We are continuing to rationalise our membership procedures, categories, and fees, facilitated by better software.

Our committee remains alert to the need for ongoing and increased membership, primarily for the rejuvenation and continuity of the Foundation. Attracting and retaining members is about creating value and a sense of belonging to a thoroughly worthwhile cause. Keeping members informed and engaged with successful stories of rabbit control and the resultant production and environmental benefits is critical.

Committee

Following the retirement of Deane Crabb as Foundation Sponsor Livestock SA's representative on our committee it is pleasing to have their President, Joe Keynes, take on that role. Joe brings considerable experience to the table and his contribution continues the Foundations valued connection with this organisation providing opportunities to keep the need for rabbit control in front of many primary producers.

Our Advisors provide valuable insight and assistance to the committee, and we were sorry to accept Dean Rasheed's resignation from his role. We thank Dean for his long-serving support, practical insight and experience.

We are also lucky to have numerous members who support us with specialist, voluntary input. As an example, our committee thoroughly enjoyed and gained much from a media training exercise courtesy of Foundation member and Rural Media Icon, Ian Doyle.

In recent years our meetings were often necessarily by electronic conferencing. This year it has been a welcome change to have more of our committee members in face-to-face meetings, while remote members and guests attended on-line. I sincerely thank all members for their contributions during the last year.

Conclusion

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

Adj Prof Wayne Meyer.
Chair, Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia Inc.
October 2022