

Chairman’s Annual Report – 2023-24

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. In short, grazing and burrowing by 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 goal. The Foundation’s vision is for productive and regenerating landscapes, supporting abundant native plants and wildlife, free of their most notorious vertebrate pest (the European wild rabbit).

Research

R&D Portfolio

Our research portfolio, summarized in the table below, has a good spread of activities. Stephen Frankenberg’s gene-drive research has proceeded well, now supported by considerable Federal Government funds. The “Quorum of quolls” project application to the Australian Research Council did not get up in the 2023. It did receive positive reviews and after resubmission has been supported in the 2024 round. Its purpose is to test whether targeted removal of rabbit warrens will allow vegetation to recover and reduce cat presence, expanding and connecting habitat for entire communities of wildlife at large landscape scale.

Project Commitments			
Project	Total Cost	Paid	Remaining
Myxoma profiling: K Patel, Uni Adelaide	\$15,620	\$5,500	\$10,120
RATs for Rabbits: G Hansman, Griffith Uni	\$20,075	\$13,200	\$6,875
Tissue Library: A Iannella	\$15,700	\$10,000	\$5,700
Gen-Drive: S Frankenberg, Melb Uni	\$15,000	\$10,000	\$5,000
TOTAL	\$66,395	\$38,700	\$27,695
NB: \$60,000 allocated to UTas Strategic Control project. Yet to be contracted.			

Committee member Amy Iannella has made a significant contribution by rescuing frozen rabbit tissue samples from Turretfield and many other locations, sorting, cataloguing and relocating them into secure, long-term storage at the University of Adelaide. The availability of these samples may prove invaluable in tracking the evolution of virus bio controls. Kandarp Patel, now located at University of Adelaide, Roseworthy is continuing his interest in the development of the myxoma virus and is active in training a new cohort of students about rabbits and their control. We have received encouraging reports from Grant Hansman in the development of Rapid Antigen Tests for detecting disease related antigens in Lagomorphs (rabbits and hares). Being able to rapidly test for RHDV variants and myxoma in the field will potentially greatly improve our understanding and tracking of these bio controls. It could become an essential addition to our proposed National Rabbit Census.

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 2025. Carol Ireland has revised the call for projects documentation, and we have compiled a list of nearly 100 potential research contacts. It is pleasing to note the spread of active researchers across Australia. It is also pleasing to have had unsolicited enquiry from potential research and rabbit control groups about possible support.

Centre for Invasive Species Solutions

As we have been aware, the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) has been re-organised after the cessation of Federal Government block funding last year. It is now reshaping its funding arrangements and supporters. It’s long serving CEO, Andreas Glanznig is retiring at the end of November. A new CEO, Shauna Chadlowe has been appointed. Shauna comes from Australian Wildlife Conservancy, where she has been part of the Executive Team as the Chief Conservation Alliance Officer for several years. This is a welcome development for the continuation of CISS and for the likely increased connection with conservation land managers and the need for feral pest control. Our membership of CISS remains important as it continues to house or connect to the major expertise in rabbit bio control. Its published Rabbit Biocontrol Strategy sets out the need for a pipeline of research expertise and projects for effective long-term control. The Foundations current and potential supported research and application projects align well with the Strategy.

Awareness

Easter Bilby

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.

A very significant contributor to the identity of Rabbit-Free Australia is our trademarked Easter Bilby and, more recently, Easter Bilby’s Friends. The first of our Bilby’s Friends children’s book (Banjo Frog’s Concert Spectacular) was released in February this year to critical acclaim. Author Kristin Martin and illustrator Bianca Richardson are to be congratulated for their creativity and hard work in bringing this together.



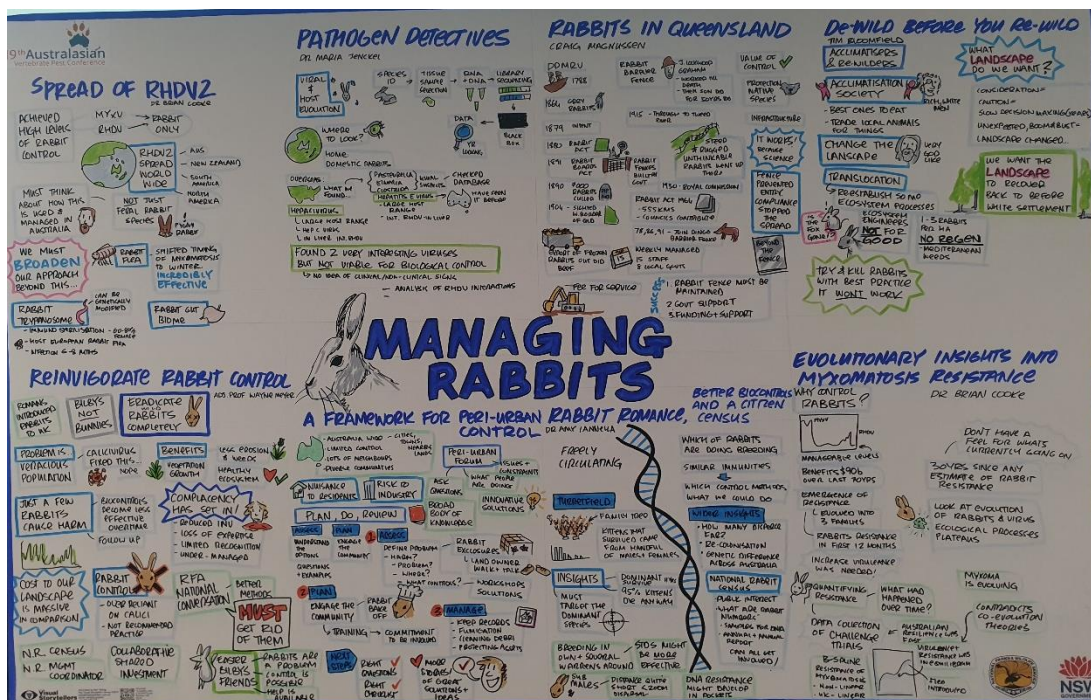
Scenes from the reading and book launch at the Hamra Centre library, West Torrens in February 2024.

The children's book market is highly competitive, and the support of Michael Bollen from Wakefield Press is acknowledged with appreciation. A second book, featuring the honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*) from southwest WA, is well advanced and again promises to be a quality product. Launches of this book will be at Mt Gambier and Adelaide in March and Albany W.A. in April 2025. I particularly appreciate the considerable background work that Vicki Linton has put into this and to the local connections, including Teele Hooper-Worrell who will represent us at the inaugural reading and launch in Albany.

To assist awareness and distribution of the books, EO Peter is arranging to supply books to public libraries around the country. Library staff use the books to deliver Storytime book-reading sessions with educational information and activities made available for those involved. A small crew of volunteers are making felt hand puppets for use in the book-readings. It is evident that to continue production of the series as we envisaged, we must consider additional up front financial support and may need to seek public assistance.

Australasian Vertebrate Pests Conference, 2024

Following Committee resolution to support attendance at the most relevant conference(s), four members made presentations at the 19th Australasian Vertebrate Pest Conference (AVPC) in Sydney in July. The Foundation hosted a morning tea that advertised our presence while the chocolate Bilby's donated by Haigh's were enthusiastically snapped up. With our presentations, there was a dedicated full morning session on rabbit research, artfully summarised on a board.



All who attended thought that we had made our presence felt, there were many positive contacts made and there is good evidence that our role and influence was recognised. Involvement in future similar forums will be an important way of increasing our credibility and influence.

On-ground Action

Rabbit Control R & D Webinar

As part of the Foundation developing and promoting a “national conversation” about rabbit control we have had a third virtual Rabbit Control R & D forum held on 20 March 2024. The arrangements were facilitated by the Foundation and CISS. More than 150 participants were registered from across Australia and New Zealand. Theme: Rabbit control and why it matters. Providing the latest information on current and prospective rabbit controls options, why control is important for environmental security, and how to engage communities in rabbit control.

Emcee Richard Price managed the event with the following speakers:

- Rabbit Biocontrols. Current status and where next; Brian Cooke, Tanja Strive
- Rabbit Pesticides. Pindone and 1080; Penny Fisher, Trudy Sharp
- Post-calici Rabbit Grazing. Effects on vegetation; Mike Letnic, Neil Ross
- Australian Rabbit Managers Network. Update; Tony Buckmaster
- Easter Bilby's Friends. Reinvigorating rabbit control; Wayne Meyer

A fourth Forum is being prepared for March 2025. This will feature a series of presentations around Gene-drive technology and developments for future control of rabbits. This is an exciting and challenging prospect that needs much greater exposure to improve our understanding of what is involved, what prospects and over what time frame.

The Australian Rabbit Managers Network (ARMN)

ARMN meetings have again been facilitated by the Foundation and CISS, with three meetings in the year. There has been a slightly variable group of about twenty participants, with all states represented along with representatives from Australian Government Departments and CSIRO.

Following up from last year when it was apparent that there was variable understanding of RHDV in general and use of K5 in particular, a "fact sheet" titled "Keys to rabbit control" was produced and another, "Optimising K5", is being finalised. A third information sheet, "Pindone and 1080", is also underway, responding to concerns, especially in peri-urban areas about the use of pindone. It is extremely pleasing that these publications are the result of rabbit control managers telling us what they need to know, of having input from the best technical experts and then a cooperative editing process to produce a quality information source.

A further spin out from the ARMN has been the development of the Peri Urban Rabbit Forum (PURF). With input from local agency and citizen groups in all States and the ACT, the group has provided a new focus on the issues associated with controlling wild rabbits in urban areas. Factors such as social attitudes to rabbit control, use of poisons close to dwellings and concern about pet rabbits are issues of concern. Their Forum is developing a Framework to guide the planning and deployment of rabbit control programs in peri-urban areas.

National Rabbit Management Coordinator (NRMCM)

It is extremely satisfying to report that a National Rabbit Management Coordinator is about to be appointed. This result comes from Foundation leadership in initially developing a discussion paper on the need, then, after wide ranging consultation, a business proposal. This process was actively supported by CISS through Tony Buckmaster and Andreas Glanznig. Andreas undertook the demanding activity of seeking supporting funds from Federal, State and Territory Governments as well as from primary industry and conservation groups.

Soon after AVPC interactions in Sydney, a call came from Federal Government (DAFF) to Andreas to submit a proposal. There is little doubt that the financial commitments of \$10,000 per year for 3 years to support the position from both the Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia and from the Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Board were greatly influential. Currently, the position is being advertised, a selection panel appointed and discussion on the make-up of a Steering Committee is initiated. The Foundation will be active in ensuring that the operation of the Coordinator position is consistent with the intent of the business proposal. Our focus, principally through membership of the steering committee, will be to have a very effective, inclusive and cooperative coordinator. We are willing to assist and collaborate while retaining our independence and profile.

Operations

Our membership has been maintained over the last year and continues to slowly grow. There are currently 107 members, including Honorary members, a category introduced to recognise partners and collaborators who assist in our work.

Our Committee has met four times during the past year, mostly by electronic conferencing. I sincerely thank all Committee members for their contributions during the last year and particularly acknowledge the exceptional

recording and organising capability of our Executive Officer, Peter Day. The record of our meetings and the communication of all activities of RFA are meticulous.

As foreshadowed, Committee member Amy Iannella has finished her five-year term. I thank her for her significant contributions over that time. Amy has agreed to remain involved as an Advisor.

Advisors are appointed by the Committee and play an important role with the expertise and experience they provide. I want to particularly thank Vicki Linton, Anne Burgi, Rosie Gerolemou, Bruce Munday and Nicholas Newland. The Committee is pleased to announce that all have agreed to remain as Advisors in 2025. The Committee have also re-appointed William Morgan as Treasurer and Public Officer and Peter Day as Secretary and Executive Officer. Peter was re-appointed for 2025 with the current contract for the provision of Executive Services (by 'Peter R Day Resource Strategies') to be extended until Dec 31, 2025.

It is with pleasure that I announce that ARMN members Teele Hooper-Worrell (from Peel-Harvey Biosecurity Group, Western Australia) and Heidi Kleinert (formerly with the Victorian Rabbit Action Network - VRAN) have accepted nominations to join the Committee.

Finally, and most importantly, I announce that existing Committee member Craig Magnusson, CEO of the Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Board (Qld), has accepted a nomination and been appointed by the Committee as in-coming Chairman. Craig will begin his appointment at the next Committee meeting in December. I look forward to seeing the continued evolution of the Foundation in years to come.

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. In the 5 years as Chairman, 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. The development of the R&D Forum, ARMN, PURF and NRMC are major achievements. The rejuvenation of Committee membership, now with truly National connections sets the Foundation up for even greater effectiveness. I thank and congratulate Craig as the next Chairman of the Foundation and wish him every success. And last, I sincerely thank Peter and Vicki Day for their magnificent and generous support.