

Grazing management principles: No.1

Actively control feral animals

Actively controlling pest animals is an essential part of good land management in the Western Local Region.

Unmanaged feral goats, pigs, wild dogs, foxes and rabbits can contribute to a significant run-down in the natural resource base.

These feral animals adversely affect pasture and livestock productivity, water quality, soil stability and disease management. They also have a critical impact on native fauna and flora.

Unmanaged goats

Unmanaged goats are the most significant feral animal species over most across the Western Local Region. Control of goats is crucial before improved grazing management to increase groundcover can be implemented. Goats affect biodiversity by competing for forage, removing cover and fouling natural waters. Damage to high conservation value areas such as mound springs and rock art is well documented.

Feral pigs

Feral pigs are a major pest animal with a rapidly increasing range. Their impacts include predation on lambs, increased disease risk, the destruction of vegetation and disturbance of soils, particularly near waterways. They compete with and prey on native wildlife.

Rabbits

Rabbits are the most widespread pest in the Western Local Region, occurring on most land types except for the heavy cracking clays of the floodplains. Rabbit haemorrhagic disease (commonly known as calicivirus) significantly lowers rabbit density but numbers are expected to increase as the population develops resistance to the virus. It is important to continue to actively control rabbits rather than rely on biological control agents alone.

Foxes

Foxes are one of Australia's most widely-spread feral animals. Foxes hunt lambs and cause significant economic losses to farmers in areas where fox numbers are high. They have a critical impact on the survival of small native animals.

Wild dogs

A wild dog means any dog, including a dingo, that is or has become wild but excludes any dog kept in accordance with Companion Animal legislation. Wild dogs are a very significant problem in the Western Local Region and have an increasing impact on agricultural production.

Benefits of controlling pest animals

Greater ability to manage total grazing pressure (TGP)

Improved grazing management for better groundcover depends on controlling feral animals such as goats and rabbits as they contribute to TGP. By actively controlling these pest species, their impact on the landscape can be substantially reduced.

Improved profitability

Feral grazing animals have substantial economic impacts on agricultural production. They actively compete for feed resources with domestic stock and this leads to lower weight gains. Pigs, foxes and wild dogs also have a significant impact by predation on lambs, kids and calves. Appropriate management greatly reduces the economic impact of these pest species.

Prevention of rundown in pasture condition

Healthy perennial pastures that are not overgrazed recover quicker from drought, compared to pastures which need time to regenerate from seed. Actively managing feral animal populations decreases the likelihood of pasture rundown.

Reduced impact on native species

Feral animals impact on native plant and animal species through predation, grazing, direct competition for resources and habitat degradation. By actively controlling feral populations, you can reduce their impact – improving habitat and reducing competition with native species.

Reduced risk of disease

Feral animals spread diseases that may be highly contagious to domestic stock and native species, as well as to humans, such as Q Fever and rabies. By actively controlling feral populations, this risk is significantly reduced.

Grazing management principles: No.1

Recognise the signs of a feral animal population

Feral animal populations can be measured in two ways: measuring their abundance or measuring their impacts.

Unmanaged goats

An informal way of measuring feral goat abundance can be by counting animals or observing tracks and dung when travelling along regular routes or when spotlighting. This gives an indication of increases or decreases in populations.

Impacts of feral goats include grazing of groundcover and browsing trees and shrubs. This can decrease groundcover levels and change the abundance of palatable trees and shrubs. Wild orange and rosewood are heavily grazed by feral goats which can reduce the regeneration of these trees.

Feral goats also damage high conservation value sites such as mound springs and water holes by trampling and concentrating droppings.

Figure 2: Unmanaged goats are the most significant feral animal species in the Western Local Region.



Feral Pigs

Most land managers would be familiar with the signs of pig activity, but for those who aren't, there are signs to look out for:

Rooting: Feral pig rooting is distinctive and generally more evident after rain. Signs of rooting can be small, just the odd 'snouting' up, or substantial, leaving hectares looking like ploughed paddocks.

Wallowing: In hot weather feral pigs wallow in the mud on the edge of dams or wet areas, leaving an oval depression. These wallows will help determine how recently pigs have been in the area. They will often rub against trees or fence posts nearby leaving a mud-rub.

Tusking: Adult boars will 'tusk' saplings leaving cut marks, usually near water or a pad.

Crop Damage: Feral pigs will root up plants and eat and trample crops to create a camp.

Pads, Tracks and Fences: Pads will be single file, but tracks can sometimes be confused with sheep or deer tracks. Signs of pads under fences will differ from those used by kangaroos, as there will be mud and bristles on the wire.

Scats: are well formed, approx 30 mm to 60 mm diameter and up to 250 mm long, often consisting of vegetable matter, bristles, wool, bone chips and hair.

Nests: Sows will build nests from vegetation up to three metres in diameter and up to a metre high.

Wild dogs

Wild dogs are nocturnal hunters and unless food is particularly scarce they won't be visible during daylight hours. As a consequence, without careful monitoring it can be difficult to determine how serious your wild dog problem is. Monitoring will also allow you to determine the effectiveness of control programs and identify likely trapping sites.

Check for evidence of wild dog activity by looking for scats (faeces), tracks or signs (remains of injured or dead animals) and listen for barking or howling. Sandpads and Infra-red surveillance cameras are being used to detect and monitor pest animals. The Invasive Animals CRC has developed a simple indicator checklist to detect the presence of wild dogs on your lands www.feral.org.au/have-you-got-wild-dogs.

Manage pest animals as part of total grazing pressure

All grazing animals, including domestic, feral and native animals, need to be managed so native plant species are not over-grazed. The impact of feral animals can be substantial.

It is conservatively estimated that there are about 3.3 million unmanaged goats in western NSW. The overall average density of goats across western NSW in 2013 was 7.22 goats per square kilometre, up from 1.14 goats per square kilometre in 1999.

Some management strategies for controlling TGP are:

- use of mesh-type or electric fencing to control feral animal movements
- trap yards around water points to capture and remove unmanaged goats
- control of water points by mesh-type fencing around ground tanks or using poly tanks and troughs
- turning-off water points in de-stocked paddocks
- control of kangaroo populations
- ripping of rabbit warrens, even when calicivirus is working, to prevent rabbits reinfesting warrens and breeding.

Figure 3: Electric fencing used to control the movement of unmanaged goats resulting in more groundcover.



Stay up-to-date with current pest management practices

Research into feral animal management is on-going and new techniques for control are ever-evolving. Rather than implementing control activities at times of risk, plan pest management practices to have the greatest impact on the target species.

Speak to neighbours and learn from their successes and failures. Plan pest management strategies together and contact your local Landcare or wild dog group which may be able to assist you in coordinating with others in your area.

Wild dogs

Local Land Services Western Region undertakes regular wild dog control programs as well as landholder training opportunities.

Local Land Services is partnering with other NSW Government agencies, industry bodies and wild dog control groups using ground and aerial baits, trapping, GPS tracking using collars and monitoring with motion cameras.

Effective wild dog management usually involves a combination of control methods and strategies.

Pigs

There are a number of methods available for the control of feral pigs including 1080 baiting, trapping, exclusion fencing as well as aerial and ground shooting.

As with any pest control program, a single control method used in isolation may provide limited local control of pig populations; however a coordinated program involving neighbours and utilising multiple control methods will prove more successful over a broader area.

Foxes

Foxes breed between July and October with a peak season in August. They average four young but litters of up to 10 are also known. In arid areas, foxes can range over up to 23 square kilometres.

There is overwhelming evidence to support the negative effects of foxes on native fauna but foxes are also known to suppress the populations of introduced rabbits and feral cats. Despite this small benefit, the cumulative impact of all three of these feral species on Australian flora and fauna is vast. Control programs that target these species are required to reduce their impacts.

Successful fox control programs should have two key elements: coordination across a number of properties and tenures and secondly; a focus on the species that are under the greatest threat from foxes. For example, baiting foxes just prior to lambing will give the greatest chance of lamb survival.

Figure 4: Bait being injected with poison for pest animal baiting.



Rabbits

Rabbits are dependent on warrens or other shelter so destruction of these will greatly reduce the local rabbit population. Rabbits are also highly susceptible to disease (myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease) and predators including feral cats, foxes and wild dogs.

Common methods of control include: baiting, biological controls such as myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease, fumigation, shooting, fencing, trapping and dogging.

Primary control for rabbit populations should be based on gaining the maximum reduction of the population.

Grazing management principles: No.1

What are the consequences of not actively controlling feral animals?

- Reduced ability to effectively manage total grazing pressure.
- Economic impacts through lost production (eg lambing losses).
- Damage/run-down in pasture and land condition over time.
- Damaged landscape function and reduced biodiversity values.
- Increased risk of exotic disease spreading to domestic stock.

Further reading

Other fact sheets in this series

- No.2 Control access to watering points
- No.3 Maintain and improve groundcover
- No.4 Managing for dry conditions
- No.5 Manage invasive native scrub (INS)
- No.6 Manage pasture species
- No.7 Total grazing pressure
- No.8 Match stock numbers to feed availability
- No.9 Rest pastures regularly

Case study

Good management, less stress – the Mosely family

DVD

Looking over the Fence – grazing management in the rangelands, Western Catchment Management Authority, 2013

Other fact sheets

AgFacts – Grazing management following drought – NSW DPI, 2007

AgFact – Pasture sustainability during drought – Hacker, R, NSW DPI, 2007

AgFact – Drought decision time – Graham, P., NSW DPI, 2005

Primefact – The role of climate science in drought management – Carberry and Graham, NSW DPI, 2007

Primefact – Using seasonal rainfall outlooks – Carberry P, NSW DPI, 2007

Books

Best management practices for extensive grazing enterprises –Hacker, R, Beange, L, Casburn, G, Curran G, Gray, P, Warner, J, 2005

A Grazier's Guide to... – Western Local Land Services offices have a number of the guides in this series, including Belah-Bluebush, Saltbush Plains, Mallee, Mulga and Bimble-Box Pine

Feral goat management in South West Queensland – final report to the Bureau of Resource Sciences, Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Brisbane – Thompson, J, Reithmuller, J, Kelly, D, Boyd-Law, S and Miller E, 1999

The Glove Box Guide to Tactical Grazing Management for the semi-arid woodlands – Campbell, T. & Hacker, R., 2000

Managing native pastures – a grazier's guide – Partridge, I, 1992

Maranoa-Balonne Grazing Land Management Package – MLA Edge Network, QDPI&F, 2007

General enquiries

1300 795 299

admin.western@lls.nsw.gov.au

www.western.lls.nsw.gov.au

ISBN: 978 1 74256 656 6, 978 1 74256 655 9.

© State of New South Wales through Local Land Services 2015. The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing July 2015. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that the information upon which they rely is up to date and to check the currency of the information with the appropriate officer of Local Land Services or the user's independent adviser. For updates go to www.lls.nsw.gov.au