

Rabbits

Introduction

Domestic (European) Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) are native to north-western Africa, Spain and Portugal. They now also occur in the USA, Chile and most of Western Europe, causing the most damage in Australia and New Zealand.

Domestic rabbits arrived into Australia with the first fleet and in 1859 wild rabbits were released in Victoria for sports hunting. By 1886, rabbits had spread up the east coast to the Queensland border. By the end of the 1880's, rabbits had begun to ecologically consolidate throughout Australia with their population density peaking parallel to sheep numbers. By 1910, rabbits had covered most of their current distribution and today inhabit approximately four million square kilometers throughout Australia, occurring in a range of habitats, generally around agricultural production.

The reproduction cycle of rabbits occurs in response to a combination of rainfall and an increase in food availability. Males and females become sexually mature at three-four months of age and can produce litters averaging four-five kittens up to eight times a year in favourable conditions. The gestation period is approximately 28-30 days, and newly emerged kittens can travel up to 1.5km to find a new warren after weaning.

Rabbits are thought to be among the most detrimental of all exotic animals to the Australian environment and the Agricultural Industry. They compete with native animals for food and shelter, and with livestock for food, eating nutritious pastures and changing the composition of plant species within pastures, thereby reducing productivity, and causing land management issues.

Control options

There are a variety of methods that can be used to control rabbits, varying with each individual situation. In most cases, a combination of more than one control method will show the best results.

What to look for

Rabbit activity and population size around your property can be observed and monitored by identifying evidence such as:

- Warrens (group of rabbit burrows);
- Bare patches of earth;
- Small scratching in the earth, usually with roots showing;
- Droppings;
- Droppings and scratching around dead and fallen timber and rubbish piles (both timber and human waste); and
- Fresh earth dug up into the rabbit hole.



If there is sufficient harbour, such as weeds and rubbish piles, rabbits will not create warrens, but live in or around the harbours.

Poisoning

1080 and Pindone are the registered poisons used for rabbit control, both requiring a minimum of three free feeds to encourage maximum amounts of rabbits eating and attain how much bait is needed.

Poisons can be placed on carrots, grain or pellets.

- Pindone requires three consecutive feeds to ensure effectiveness with results expected approximately 14 days after the last poison feed. It can be used only on properties larger than 1000 square meters; or
- 1080 uses only one poisoning feed with results observed within 24hrs.

Restrictions include distance from neighbouring properties and houses, notification to neighbours, signage and a chemical users card (AQF III) or the LLS 1080/Pindone card.



Fumigation

This is delivered through phosphine gas tablets when there are only a few holes present. Tablets are placed down a hole with all other entrances sealed to ensure no rabbits escape and that the gas is not diluted. Water is applied to the tablets to generate and release the gas release.

Running dogs around the area prior to fumigation ensures rabbits are in the burrows.

Harbour Destruction

If warrens and harbours are present, harbour destruction is an essential part of a control program, discouraging any further population increase. Warrens can be destroyed by ripping using a tractor or bulldozer. Removal of rabbit harbours such as timber and rubbish piles and woody weeds can be equally important as warren destruction.

Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (Calicivirus)

This is a biological control agent that causes death within 48-72hrs, with a mortality rate of up to 70% in susceptible populations. Natural immunity in some adults and all kittens for the first eight to ten weeks of life can see this method of control achieve nil results.

Myxomatosis

- Initial success has greatly declined due to genetic resistance and virus attenuation;
- There are irregular outbreaks of the disease in the field showing different results; and
- Myxomatosis spreads by contact with infected hosts and through fleas.

Explosives

Another option for harbour destruction is explosives. These are useful in areas that are difficult to get at both manually and mechanically. Many regulations need to be followed for this action to take place.

Further information

Central West Local Land Services staff can assist you with rabbit removal. Officers are available to provide you with professional advice on the best control options, hire bait layers and preparation of poison feed.

To find out more about rabbit control, contact Central West Local Land Services on 1300 795 299.