



Victorian Pest Management

A Framework for Action

Rabbit Management Strategy



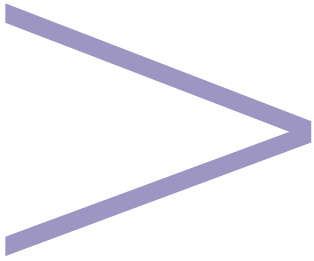
Department of
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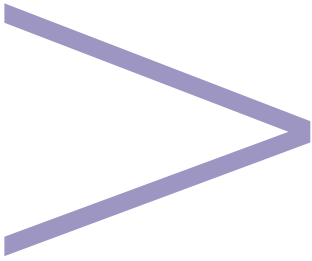
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Rabbit Management Strategy

Reasons for Government investment in rabbit management

Rabbits are the most serious vertebrate pest in Victoria, causing major environmental and economic damage. In the past rabbits have defied all attempts to reduce their numbers to low levels on a long-term basis. Rabbits occur throughout all climatic zones and land types. Many infestations occur in areas where management is difficult and/or costly to implement. Rabbit management is a community issue as effective management of rabbits directly benefits the whole community.

Scope of the rabbit management strategy

The approaches described in this Strategy are consistent with the aims and outcomes of the Victorian Pest Management – A Framework for Action (VPMF) and deal with rabbit management in Victoria. Rabbit management is principally the responsibility of each land and waterway manager. The Government's role in rabbit management includes the provision of an appropriate legislative and policy framework. The Government will primarily contribute to rabbit management in situations where that action results in public benefit, and will provide funding in accordance with agreed shared investment guidelines. The Government may also have a role in ensuring that all partners in rabbit management meet their responsibilities.

Goal

Minimise the impact of rabbits on environmental, economic and community values through the implementation of a community supported strategic approach to rabbit management that contributes to the protection of biodiversity and production outcomes of regional and statewide strategies.

Aims

1. Agricultural

- To protect the productive resource base by reducing the:
- Economic impact of rabbits to a cost-effective level and sustaining this level through ongoing maintenance programs;
- Physical degradation of natural resources (soil, vegetation and water) caused, or initiated, by rabbit activity.

2. Biodiversity

- Protect and promote the recovery of species and ecological communities that are endangered or vulnerable due to competition by rabbits;
- Minimise land degradation caused by rabbits and promote recovery of the degraded areas in the state so the viability of natural ecosystems, and endangered and vulnerable native species and ecological communities, is maximised.

Implementation of the Strategy will effectively coordinate strategic and sustained rabbit management statewide across all land and water tenures in a way that:

- Promotes and ensures an integrated, coordinated and cooperative approach to rabbit management within catchments and across Victoria, regardless of land or water tenure, through effective partnerships;
- Implements and monitors prioritised actions of Catchment Management Authority (CMA) Rabbit Action Plans;
- Ensures that rabbit management is recognised as an integral part of natural resource or catchment management strategies and programs (eg biodiversity conservation, native vegetation management, salinity management etc);
- Ensures that rabbit management does not deleteriously impact on likely or known Aboriginal sites of significance;
- Improves community awareness of the rabbit problem and ensures skilled and effective community participation in rabbit management activities;
- Implements best practice rabbit management based on the appropriate application of research findings, monitoring and formal reviews;
- Provides for rehabilitation of areas where rabbits have been removed;
- Promotes the concept of 'Rabbit Free!' A 'rabbit free' property is defined as 'land that does not demonstrate any visible signs of rabbits when assessed using normal methods'. This concept does not necessarily mean the complete and permanent absence of rabbits; and
- Ensures all land and waterway managers are aware of their duty of care to land and water resources.

Stakeholders in managing rabbits

Government and community stakeholders in rabbit management include:

- State Government: The Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE), Parks Victoria;
- Linear managers such as VicRoads and delegated managers such as lessees and Committees of Management;
- CMAs and the Victorian Catchment Management Council (VCMC);
- Federal Government; Environment Australia and Bureau of Resource Science, (Natural Heritage Trust, National Feral Animal Control Program);
- Vertebrate Pest Committee (the lead committee providing technical and policy advice on matters related to the prevention and management of vertebrate pests to governments throughout Australia and New Zealand);
- Key industry groups such as the Victorian Farmers Federation, animal welfare groups and conservation groups;
- Private landholders and waterway managers (including companies, corporations and Landcare groups);
- Local government; and
- Interstate pest management authorities/government institutes.

The roles of the key agencies that are involved in rabbit management are set out below.

Department of Natural Resources and Environment

NRE is the main State Government department responsible for the administration and management of Victoria's resources and public land and waters. NRE has policy interpretation and legislative responsibility for rabbit management and coordinates the implementation of the Government's rabbit management programs. These programs are delivered through the direct management of public lands and through the provision of behavioural change programs (extension, enforcement and targeted incentives) for private land programs. NRE is also responsible for delivering cost-effective advisory, educational and regulatory services in sustainable land and water management and agricultural industry development.

Public land managers within NRE – Forests Division, Parks Flora and Fauna Division, through Parks Victoria, and Land Victoria - are the NRE Divisions responsible for the management of most public land in Victoria. The management of public land by Parks Flora and Fauna Division is directed through Parks Victoria. Public land management is carried out in accordance with the Victorian Biodiversity Strategy, which is a whole-of-government document for the Victorian community with NRE being the lead agency for its implementation.

Victorian Catchment Management Council

The VCMC was established under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act*. Its role is to advise the Minister for Environment and Conservation on natural resource management issues and report on the quality of land and water resources.

Catchment Management Authorities

The major role of the CMAs is to ensure the sustainable development of natural resource-based industries; the maintenance, and where possible, improvement of land and water resources; and the conservation of natural and cultural heritage in Victoria. CMAs have a responsibility to implement their regional Rabbit Action Plans and inform their regional communities about the agreed programs, priorities and funding for rabbit management. CMAs guide the implementation of catchment priorities through advice to the State Government and Regional Assessment Panels

on regional priorities for funding. Within catchments, each CMA administers grants to landholders under the Government's Second Generation Landcare Program using the community consultation mechanisms provided through the Regional Assessment Panel (RAP).

VicRoads

VicRoads (or local government acting as its agent) manages roads declared under the *Transport Act* (Freeways, Highways, Main Roads, Forest Roads and Tourist Roads) and is responsible for the implementation of pest management as defined under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act* on these roads. VicRoads, in partnership with other stakeholders, implements strategies to ensure sustainable roadside biodiversity.

Water Managers

Waterway managers have an important role to play in reducing the impact of rabbits through appropriate channel or river frontage management works. Waterway managers include Rural Water Authorities who are responsible for irrigation and drainage channels, CMAs who act as inland water managers, including unlicensed river frontages and Urban Water Authorities who are responsible for specific water catchment areas.

Local government

Local government has an important role to play in natural resource management as it has relatively broad powers in relation to environmental control, protection and conservation, as well as being a land manager. Local government, through the local planning scheme, determines the appropriate use and development of land. As part of the scheme, they must have regard to relevant aspects of regional catchment strategies and any associated implementation plan or strategy approved under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act*. Statutory planning provides an essential framework for future sustainable regional development. Local government (when acting as an agent for VicRoads) also has responsibilities for pest management on roadsides under its management.

Public land management

Forest Management Plans and Park Management Plans are the principle strategic documents for forest land, and land managed by Parks Victoria, and incorporate pest management as a component. Priority rabbit management in the Plans will be primarily directed to the protection of significant natural values of the land and to meeting community 'good neighbour' expectations.

Where rabbit management on public land primarily benefits the land itself, such as biodiversity conservation and the protection of the natural resource base, management is the core responsibility of the relevant public land manager. Each public land manager will develop programs based on the strategic directions detailed in the VPMF, in particular Chapter 3 – Pest Management Principles and Chapter 7 - Public Land Management. Funding for these programs will be allocated from the land manager's annual budget and regional programs included in the whole of catchment coordination and reporting process to be undertaken by CMAs.

Where rabbit management on public land also benefits adjoining private lands, this management will be the responsibility of the relevant public land manager and met through the Good Neighbour Program (GNP). The GNP is managed by NRE to address damage caused to the community by pests originating on adjoining public land.

Victorian Legislation

The principal legislation relating to the management of rabbits in Victoria is the *Catchment and Land Protection Act*, which is administered by NRE. Under this legislation rabbits are declared as an Established Pest Animal and land managers have the responsibility to prevent the spread of, and as far as possible eradicate, rabbits from their land. The *National Parks Act* and the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* are also relevant in rabbit management.

Roadside rabbit management

The *Catchment and Land Protection Act* adopts a shared approach to managing rabbits on roadsides. It recognises management responsibilities of those managing the land, the responsibilities of those causing the problem, and identifies those who benefit from action taken.

The responsibility for eradicating and controlling the spread of rabbits on roadsides depends on the class of road. Currently VicRoads (or local governments acting as its agent) has responsibility for managing all rabbits on the declared road network that includes highways, freeways, main roads and tourist roads. Landowners, both public and private, are responsible for the management of rabbits on the adjoining 'local' road.

Strategic approach to rabbit management in Victoria

Strategy 1 Improving the process of setting priorities and decision making in rabbit management

To be effective rabbit management will need to involve the close integration of research activities with land and waterway managers working together to assess, manage and monitor the rabbit problem. Management programs will be coordinated at a regional level with the primary focus of NRE activity on prioritising rabbit problems then allocating resources according to these priorities. To ensure investment decisions are made on the best information available, the benefits and costs of rabbit management need to be assessed and priorities determined in accordance with the assessments, taking into account the importance of the following activities:

- Maintaining and extending gains made from the impact of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD). The recent success of RHD must not lead to a decreased priority for rabbit management;
- Protecting past investment through ongoing maintenance of management programs;
- Targeting areas where multiple benefits can be achieved;
- Coordinating rabbit management action between public and private land and waterway managers with shared problems; and
- Contributing to the protection of biodiversity and natural resources.

The key elements to this approach are:

Agricultural protection

Principles for Government funding of private land and waterway pest management, including rabbit management, are detailed in the VPMF. In relation to rabbit management, NRE investment for agricultural protection will be to:

- Maximise public or community benefit from rabbit management by private landholders and waterway managers;
- Fulfil the responsibility of public land managers to act as 'good neighbours' in addressing the Regional Catchment Strategies and Action Plans of the CMAs.

Where such programs can also benefit biodiversity on private and/or public lands, a higher level of Government investment may be warranted.

Biodiversity protection/threat abatement planning

Rabbit management on public land and waterways is designed to contribute to meeting the strategic priorities of ecologically sustainable development, enhanced biodiversity values, improved natural resource management and effective community engagement in decision making. Rabbit management is a major component of effective stewardship of public land and is an integral part of the sustainable and integrated land and waterway management in Victoria's catchments.

Rabbits are a major ongoing threat to biodiversity. The above approach will be implemented across Victoria according to the risk posed by rabbits to biodiversity and natural resources, and the severity of that threat relative to other threats, consistent with the priorities of the Victorian Biodiversity Strategy. In accordance with the Biodiversity Strategy this approach will be based on the results of Bioregional Network Analyses and decision support tools that have been used to prioritise risk and appropriate responses.

A bioregion is an area defined primarily by biological and geographic criteria. It is big enough to take into account the complex relationships between species and landscapes as the basis for maintaining the integrity of plant and animal communities, yet small enough to group issues together and concentrate on achievable tasks. Bioregional Networks provide the framework for bioregional planning and reporting and consist of clusters of neighbouring bioregions across Victoria that involve all major biodiversity asset managers (Parks Victoria, NRE, CMAs, local government) with their role being to share detailed information on the conservation of biodiversity assets.

Land and water protection

Other resource-based strategies have been developed in regions to decide where investment by Government and the community can be best used to protect biodiversity and natural resources. These strategies are focussed on integrated land, water and biodiversity management and are designed to manage the impact of land use. Lengthy planning processes have identified those areas that are the highest priorities for resource allocation. Given the serious impact rabbits have on the land use and water quality, the best method of assigning priorities for rabbit investment is to use the other natural resource strategies' priority areas as the foundation for defining future priority rabbit investment.

Objective 1 – Improve the process of making decisions in rabbit management

Strategic Action	Key Responsibility	Partners	Timeframes
1. A priority setting model will be:	NRE	VCMC, CMAs, Parks Victoria, industry groups and organisations	Draft process June 2003 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i developed that considers economic, environmental and social impact of rabbits and recommendations under the regional planning process; and ii applied at a State and regional level to determine priorities for action on both public and private lands and waterways. 	NRE	Parks Victoria, CMAs, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	December 2003 and ongoing

Strategy 2 Strategic rabbit management programs using regional Rabbit Action Plans

All CMAs have developed Rabbit Action Plans. These Plans provide the agreed framework needed for prioritising Government and community action in rabbit management at a regional level. On private land and waterways, NRE will provide targeted behavioural change programs (extension and enforcement activities) to support regional priorities in Action Plans. CMAs will inform the community of the actions and aims outlined in the Plans to ensure expectations are met.

Objective 2 – Ensure strategic planning

Strategic Action	Key Responsibility	Partners	Timeframes
2. Implement and support Rabbit Action Plans	CMAs	NRE, Parks Victoria, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	June 2002 and ongoing
3. Advise the community as to the desired actions and outcomes of the Rabbit Action Plans	CMAs	NRE, Parks Victoria, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	December 2002 and ongoing
4. Provide targeted behavioural change programs on private land and waterways to support regional priorities in Action Plans.	NRE	NRE Landowners, waterway managers, Landcare and community groups	Ongoing

Strategy 3 Build partnerships to ensure effective statewide and regional coordination

Effective rabbit management programs cannot be delivered by Government alone. Partnerships between all levels of Government, the wider community and key industry and farming groups are a key element in the successful implementation of this Strategy. NRE has successfully established partnerships with state and local government agencies, industry groups, CMAs and the community in general. However, the management of rabbits at a State and regional level requires a strategic and coordinated approach. To ensure this occurs, coordination and reporting relationships will be established across Government, NRE and catchments. Rabbit management operations, particularly ripping, have the potential to adversely impact on Aboriginal cultural sites. Effective engagement is therefore required between Aboriginal communities and NRE to explore and discuss Aboriginal culture as well as the practicalities of managing rabbits in known or other likely sites of cultural significance.

Objective 3 – Ensure effective coordination and regional involvement

Strategic Action	Key Responsibility	Partners	Timeframes
5. Provide a coordinated and strategic rabbit management focus across:			
i whole of Government and NRE - who will ensure that it is part of a consistent and agreed statewide pest management focus;	NRE	VCMC, other Government agencies and Parks Victoria	June 2003 and ongoing
ii the Good Neighbour Program - by using the existing CMA Regional Assessment Panel to consider proposed projects for funding on the private/public land interface; and	CMAs	NRE, Parks Victoria	June 2003 and ongoing
iii each CMA – who will provide effective communication and a 'whole-of-catchment' reporting process that ensures rabbit issues are prioritised and managed on all land and waterways as part of a coordinated pest management program for the region;	CMA	NRE, Parks Victoria, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	June 2004 and ongoing
iv the Rabbit Management Program - by ensuring that incentive funded projects are evaluated as part of a statewide process to monitor the ongoing effectiveness of the program.	NRE	CMAs, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	June 2004 and ongoing
6. Develop an effective Aboriginal engagement process for dealing with rabbit management issues, including reporting and developing regional and local working relationships.	NRE	Aboriginal communities	June 2003 and ongoing

Strategy 4 Best practice rabbit management

Rabbit management will be adaptive based upon the appropriate application of research findings, monitoring and formal reviews. All management techniques must focus on the overall objective of protecting and enhancing biodiversity and agricultural production values while simultaneously limiting damage to these. The impact of rabbits however varies in different situations. Low populations may be tolerable in situations such as grazing and cropping, but not tolerable where they are a particular threat to specific biodiversity values. Management emphasis will need to focus on long-term habitat modification, ie making areas less prone to rabbit damage when favourable conditions enable numbers to build up. In addition, management programs will take into consideration techniques that do not have adverse on-site and off-site impacts and are humane.

Regardless of the technique used, any program needs to be evaluated to ensure it meets appropriate best practice pest management, i.e. every rabbit management program should be appropriately planned and coordinated using the most effective, safe and humane methods available, maximise protection to biodiversity and Aboriginal cultural values and aimed at long-term management.

In addition, rabbit management programs in either geographical or species isolation are rarely effective. Successful rabbit management programs require integrated action so that they are part of the holistic management of land and water at the state, regional and local level. Integration of rabbit management programs is also required between other pest species eg. rabbit and fox, so a reduction in one pest species does not lead to an increase in another, or adversely impact on native prey species. In addition, to encourage long-term change in the use and management of land and water, rabbit management programs also need to be integrated with actions that aim to reduce sources of reinfestation, including road and water channel management.

Objective 4 – Ensure best practice rabbit management

Strategic Action	Key Responsibility	Partners	Timeframes
7. Focus all rabbit management techniques on the overall objective of limiting damage to biodiversity and agricultural production.	NRE, Parks Victoria	CMAs, industry groups and organisations, including animal welfare, VFF, agricultural service industry, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	December 2002 and ongoing
8. Best practice rabbit management will be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i through appropriately planned and coordinated programs using the most effective safe and humane methods available; ii aimed at maximising protection to biodiversity and productivity values; iii conducted at a scale sufficient to achieve ongoing and sustainable results; iv integrated at state, regional and local level; v sufficiently resourced to apply the adaptive management approach; and vi clearly communicated to public and private land and waterway managers. 	NRE, Parks Victoria,	CMAs, industry groups and organisations, including animal welfare, VFF, agricultural service industry, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	Ongoing

Strategy 5 Targeted research for best practice rabbit management

Research is a key for building the capacity for land and waterway managers to effect change. The knowledge and understanding that comes from rabbit research allows managers to develop appropriate management responses. Rabbit research in general must be able to adapt to new or changed circumstances arising from the constantly evolving natural systems, the impacts of management and the progressive expansion of human activities. Research will play a critical role in developing best practice rabbit management that is targeted, readily applied to the field and made available to the community. This includes analysing existing management techniques and practices as well as developing new and/or improved management options.

Objective 5 – Ensure effective research provides for best practice rabbit management

Strategic Action	Key Responsibility	Partners	Timeframes
<p>9. Align priorities for research to addressing knowledge gaps identified in key documents, including Regional Action Plans and targeted at long-term solutions through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i assessment of existing techniques for best practice rabbit management; ii development of safe, effective and humane rabbit management techniques; iii increased understanding of RHD through ongoing epidemiology monitoring; iv development of integrated management strategies that build on gains made by RHD; and v making research summaries available to the community. 	NRE	CMA's, Parks Victoria, industry groups and organisations, including animal welfare, VFF, agricultural service industry, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	June 2003 and ongoing

Strategy 6 Effective targeting of incentives for rabbit management

In the past, incentives to encourage landholders and waterway managers to implement pest management programs have been targeted to the protection of the economic values of the land and waterways rather than biodiversity values. Although most areas of high biodiversity value are found on public lands, there are some areas needing protection on private land and waterways. To ensure that this problem is overcome, grants allocated to rabbit management, as part of the Government's Second Generation Landcare Program, will also be targeted at priority areas for biodiversity identified in Rabbit Action Plans. In all cases, the grants will only fund activities that provide long-term rabbit management gains, particularly rabbit habitat destruction, removal or modification after rabbit populations have been removed. Site rehabilitation will also be included as a condition of these grants.

Objective 6 – More effectively target rabbit incentives

Strategic Action	Key Responsibility	Partners	Timeframes
10. NRE incentive programs will give priority to the protection of biodiversity values from the impact of rabbits.	CMA's	NRE, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	June 2003

Strategy 7 Effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting

The monitoring and annual reporting of rabbit management on public land will follow established processes such as bioregional planning and the Environmental Information System (EIS) of Parks Victoria. A statewide rabbit evaluation process will be developed and implemented by NRE for private land and waterway management programs and funded through relevant Programs. NRE will use these findings as the basis for future funding decisions. The Integrated Pest Management System (IPMS) will be used by NRE to record and evaluate all funded regional rabbit management programs undertaken on private land and waterways. Changes in knowledge, attitude, skills and practices will be measured through surveys at intervals that are specified in Rabbit Action Plans.

Objective 7 – Ensure effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting

Strategic Action	Key Responsibility	Partners	Timeframes
11. Develop "minimum standards" monitoring and reporting protocols and systematically transfer and aggregate quality data on pest occurrences from all sources, including EIS, onto the IPMS.	NRE	CMAs, Parks Victoria,	June 2003
12. Develop IPMS to provide GIS and map output and standard conversion procedures for other common user systems to enable wider and easier access by stakeholders and the community.	NRE	CMAs, Parks Victoria, municipalities, landowners, waterway managers, Landcare, industry and community groups	December 2003 and ongoing

Performance Indicators

- Increased community, support for and ownership of rabbit management programs through:
 - The evaluation of Rabbit Action Plan outcomes;
 - A shift in land and waterway manager knowledge, attitudes, skills and rabbit management practices in priority locations;
 - An increase in the percentage of land and waterway owners complying with their obligations to manage rabbits in priority areas; and
 - A long-term reduction in rabbit populations and harbour over time, demonstrated through random measurements across regional sites.
- Measurable increase in the habitat quality and viability of natural ecosystems targeted for rabbit management specifically identified through the Victorian Biodiversity Strategy.
- Relevant information recorded on appropriate monitoring and reporting systems, including the Integrated Pest Management System (IPMS) for all regional activity on private land and waterways, public land and Good Neighbour Program projects.
- Increase in the area under long-term management, including the area accredited as 'Rabbit Free!'

