

Silver Bullet for Feral Rabbit Control?

Feral rabbits in Australia

The first feral rabbit population was reported in Tasmania in 1827, but it wasn't until shortly after the release of 24 rabbits near Geelong for hunting purposes that mainland Australia encountered a feral rabbit population. Since this time, the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) has become a widespread pest throughout most of Australia. Feral rabbits can breed from just 4 months of age and at any time throughout the year provided conditions are good. Within just 18 months a single pair of rabbits can grow to 184 individuals (Agriculture Victoria).

According to Agriculture Victoria, rabbits alone are estimated to cause over \$200 million worth of damage per year to Australian Agriculture. In order to combat the quickly growing feral rabbit population which was estimated in the 1920's to be up to 10 million, State and Territory Governments began implementing biological control methods.

Biological control in Australia

Biological control (Biocontrol) is the introduction of a natural enemy or predator to control a pest population. In Australia viruses have been used to control pest rabbit populations since the 1950's when Myxoma virus was introduced. Myxoma was a largely successful method of rabbit biocontrol seeing rabbit populations culled by around 90%, today it is estimated that Myxoma Virus still affects 40-50% of the rabbit population. Due to increased genetic resistance in rabbits to the Myxoma Virus, the CSIRO began trialling rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus (RHDV1), with this virus later being released in 1996.

RHDV1 is a type of calicivirus that causes rabbits to contract rabbit haemorrhagic disease resulting in multiple organ failure, with the rabbit's death quickly ensuing. Similarly, to the release of the Myxoma Virus, significant decline in the feral rabbit population was seen however RHDV1 was less effective in cooler climates. To combat RHDV1's wavering efficacy caused by the benign rabbit calicivirus which causes rabbits to be protected against the RHDV1 strain and to increase efficacy in cooler climates a new Korean strain of the RHDV1 virus (RHDV1 K5) was released in most regions in March 2017.

Knockdown figures are not expected to be as high as previously seen with the release of Myxoma and RHDV1, with current statistics showing a 42% average decrease in rabbit populations at the sites of the virus release. Even so, biological control methods in Australia over the last 60 years have already saved Australian Agriculture \$70 billion.

Integrated rabbit management

While highly effective, the CSIRO acknowledges "Biocontrol is not a silver bullet" and that it should not be solely relied on. With feral rabbit populations still ever present in Australia, a combination of conventional control methods such as baiting, ripping and fumigation along with biological control methods allow for the best control of feral rabbit populations.

iO Shotgun Pindone Oat Rabbit Bait is the perfect choice for baiting. Shotgun harnesses the power of Pindone with premium food grade sterilised oats for use throughout Australia. iO Shotgun is proudly Australian made and is available through AIRR and Tuckers' member stores nationwide.

Baiting Tips

- Identify your rabbit population using the spotlight method.
- Bait prior to ripping or fumigation.
- Notify and involve neighbours in baiting program.
- Place warning signs on perimeter fences and/or gates.
- Ensure adequate bait for the population is applied.
- Always follow instructions as directed on the label.