

2016 Chairman's Report



Chairman's report to Members; Annual General Meeting – November 17 2016

This report to the membership is probably my last as chairman, as we as a Committee, have been considering carefully the need for turnover on the Committee. The role of chairman is no exception. New ideas and new ways of doing things are very important for all organisations and voluntary groups are no exception.

RFA has had an active year with research and planning being done for the planned release of rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus K5 (RHDVK5) largely being driven by New South Wales Department of Primary Industries. That department is the proponent for release on behalf of the Government of New South Wales. We have also been involved with helping Mike Reid, National Rabbit Facilitator, plan for the future release of K5.

As members would have read in our newsletter "Anti-Rabbit Roundup", the Committee has been concerned about the not unreasonable concentration of effort on K5, notwithstanding the arrival in Australia of RHDV2. This is a different rabbit calicivirus whose unplanned arrival seems to have taken researchers by surprise. It was first detected in the ACT several months ago and can now be found in most jurisdictions. While it is known to operate somewhat differently to K5, it is known to kill rabbits effectively and relatively quickly. We have expressed our disquiet at the relative lack of attention being directed toward RHDV2. While we acknowledge that much planning and effort has already gone into K5 and its planned release next autumn, we feel that RHDV2 has the potential to kill more rabbits and without accommodating its arrival, may well compromise the work being done on K5. We would like to see more being made of the RHDV2 opportunity, even if it means diverting some effort from K5. After all, if RHDV2 does more for biodiversity conservation and is of greater benefit for primary producers, why would you not take advantage of it?

A larger membership still seems to elude the Foundation, which is disappointing. The Committee and our Executive Officer continue to encourage others to join, but for some reason, RFA's work and efforts continue to be largely unheeded. We are most grateful for the work that Committee member Peter Day has done in bringing up to date the RFA website and including relevant material. Also we hope that the book Dr Bruce Munday is writing about the impact that wild rabbits have had on Australia will attract some more attention. RFA is partly sponsoring this book.

In addition, our effort to keep Dr Nina Schwensow in Australia to continue work on blowflies as an agent for spread of rabbit caliciviruses has so far failed to attract further investment by industry and government. Nina, a virologist from Berlin University, has now returned to Germany. On suggestion from member Ian McLachlan AO, we are now approaching Australia's major conservation NGOs to see if they might be prepared to co-invest. RFA has over the year in review put up significant funding to the extent where our financial position is less sound than it was last year, but has been timely. We thank Mutooroo Pastoral Co and Jumbuck Pastoral for their generous assistance.

There are other things that the Committee has on its agenda, but the matters above will give the membership a good idea on what we are concentrating our efforts. I want to record my thanks to the Committee for its efforts over the year. I also thank Edwina Grant, our Executive Officer for her efforts and good humour.

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The next year promises to be significant for rabbit control with new caliciviruses in Australia and also with the revamped Invasive Animals CRC. I understand that the Commonwealth Government intends to continue investing in invasive animals and it will be up to the new entity to attract co-investment from industry, governments and other NGO groups. RFA thinks it essential that the Commonwealth continues to give recognition to the impact of invasive organisms by retaining an effective entity. The wild rabbit is still Australia's worst vertebrate pest and decent rains over much of southern Australia means the threat remains with us and probably is heightened.

Finally, as always we thank Haigh's Chocolates for its continuing interest and financial support. Without it, RFA would not be able to do what it does to focus effort on Australia's wild rabbit problem.

Nicholas Newland AM
Chairman
October/November 2016