



# ANTI-RABBIT ROUNDUP

*Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia Inc.*

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**S**ustainability of rural industry and of Australia's unique flora and fauna are driving forces behind RFA's vision for a rabbit free Australia.

The past few months have seen significant developments in this quest. We have seen the release of a new biological control agent (the Korean or K5 strain of the calicivirus) coordinated by the Commonwealth Government and NSW DPI involving several hundred land managers across the nation. We have also seen the conclusion of the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre which achieved much over the past decade in improving rabbit control strategies and technologies across the country. A new research centre called the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions has been announced by the Commonwealth Government and is expected to devote a portion of its efforts to further rabbit control research and development.



These things sometimes take a long time to emerge. It has been 25 Years since the Foundation for a Rabbit Free Australia was established to work towards the eradication of wild European rabbits across Australia.

The Foundation was established in 1992 when: rabbit numbers were rising alarmingly across their range; the Myxomatosis virus was waning in effectiveness; in some areas, rabbits were reaching plague proportions not seen since the 1940's; our precious natural environments and productive landscapes were under siege from this voracious pest; and every day Australians were becoming so inured to the presence of rabbits in just about every corner of the country that they were prepared to accept the rabbit as part and parcel of Australian environment.

Winter months generally herald a lull in the activity of rabbit biological controls, as the principle insect vectors are less active during this time. Nevertheless reports of effective knockdowns by the newly released K5 strain combined with the newly arrived and wild RHDV 2 strain continue to filter into the Canberra based Centre for Invasive Species Solutions. Anecdotal observations in South Eastern Australia tend to confirm lower rabbit numbers as we enter the spring season.

Prompted by the release of the new strain of calicivirus, fresh stories are also being told and retold of the positive response in some of our precious native species as a result of the 1995 release.

Today we have rabbit numbers much contained via a suite of biological control mechanisms and many heroic individual efforts supported by Landcare groups and Natural Resource Management groups across the country. So, there are definitely some positive stories beginning to emerge and RFA has contributed to this directly in many ways (See the RFA website for details at

### RFA Supported by:



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## Those Wild Rabbits Shortlisted

Bruce Munday's recently published book, *Those Wild Rabbits – How they shaped Australia*, sponsored by RFA, has been shortlisted for the Mark and Evette Moran Nib Literary Award.

The prestigious award, now in its 16<sup>th</sup> year, recognises excellence in literary research, encouraging both emerging and established writers to submit any genre of literature. Each of the six shortlisted authors for The Nib Award have received the Alex Buzo Shortlist Prize (\$1000) and are now in contention to win the \$20,000 major award as well as the People's Choice Prize of \$1000.

The overall winner will be announced at an event in Sydney on Thursday 23 November.

The other shortlisted finalists are:

*Anaesthesia: The Gift of Oblivion and the Mystery of Consciousness* (Text Publishing) Kate Cole-Adams

*Ghost Empire* (Harper Collins) Richard Fidler

*The Phoenix Years: Art, resistance and the making of modern China* (Allen and Unwin) Madeleine O'Dea

*The Art of Rivalry: Four Friendships, Betrayals, and Breakthroughs in Modern Art* (Text Publishing) Sebastian Smee

*Brett Whiteley: Art, Life and the Other Thing* (Text Publishing) Ashleigh Wilson

## Prof Wayne Meyer on RFA



I have been a member of the RFA committee for just over a year. It's a small group with limited resources but its influence should not be underestimated. As a research scientist for many years I have appreciated that individuals or groups who are outside of government and large corporates and whose primary interests are directed at issues of collective good, potentially have enormous influence. This comes because they can represent their interest outside of direct political, regulatory and commercial vested interests and hence present themselves

with an uncommon integrity of purpose. The influence that these interest groups can wield is especially valuable for researchers and the research process. It can help garner funding and in the process strengthen the vital connection between research and its application.

Why my interest in Rabbit Free Australia? This stems from being brought up as a country kid with more than a passing interest in the surrounding natural and agricultural environment. The frosty morning bike ride to check on rabbit traps, then the return home with a live rabbit or two in a sugar bag back pack is unforgettable. The warm back was welcome but the skinning and dressing of the morning's catch along with the other regular jobs before school were less welcome. However the subsequent sale to neighbours, along with the excitement of "the catch" was enough to keep my interest. What followed has been a quest to make the most of opportunities and develop a "love of learning". This has taken me, as an agricultural scientist to many places around the world including working in the USA and South Africa before returning to CSIRO and the University of Adelaide. In recent years I have bought a property in the Murray Mallee with the intention of revegetating it. Getting rid of the rabbits continues to be an ongoing

challenge.

My research interests have developed from a plant and crop physiologist to an irrigation scientist with a particular emphasis on water and salinity management. The linking theme has been the water cycle, initially at an individual plant level and then to paddock, regional and continental scale. This inevitably ties with my primary passion for the natural and agricultural environment. In this setting, the change in the landscape as it is affected by human activity is a cause for wonder and unfortunately, concern. There is no doubt that humans are irreversibly changing the land, biota (flora and fauna), waters and atmosphere. The rate of change is beyond anything experienced in human history. The great challenge before us, and our immediate generations is unprecedented. Biologically, unrestrained growth in population and resource consumption is unsustainable. It will also become increasingly apparent that unrestrained growth is economically unsustainable as will be the improvement or even the maintenance of general human well-being. Unrestrained use, consumption and degradation of natural resources on a finite planet cannot continue indefinitely. Little wonder the search for other habitable planets has become more than a scientific curiosity. Our colonialism knows no bounds!

Thinking about all of these global changes can easily become overwhelming. This should not mean that we ignore them and content ourselves with “it’s OK for me here and now, future generations can worry about it!” What we can do is try to influence the

parts of these complex systems that are within our management capability. For example, we know that current land use is often inappropriate or beyond long term capability. We can and should be planning for changed practice and land use reassignment that will conserve natural resources. The single biggest environmental effect on the Australian landscape has been vegetation loss, primarily from grazing. And a huge part of this grazing pressure has resulted from the introduction of 12 pairs of European rabbits by Thomas Austin in 1859. Maintaining vegetative cover on the land is the most important management act we can and should do to retain vital soil. Getting rid of rabbits to reduce grazing pressure and retain more vegetative cover is within our management capability. That is why I am a member of RFA.

Prof Wayne S Meyer

BAGSc, PhD, FAIAST, GAICD



## From the Chairman (cont)

[www.rabbitfreeaustralia.com.au](http://www.rabbitfreeaustralia.com.au).) But, we are far from declaring success.

The European rabbit has proven to be an extraordinarily successful animal in Australian conditions. To stand a chance of long-term success, we must continue to learn about existing and potentially new biological control agents and other methods and how to use them in an integrated way to their best advantage

Working towards eradication, as promoted by RFA, will take us to a much more sustainable future than

simply looking for the next biological control whenever the wild rabbit becomes resistant to the last. The history of rabbit control in Australia is littered with tales of how perceptions, in the official, scientific and public arenas, quickly adapted to accept the current situation as the new normal and cease to work towards better outcomes. We can do better by continuing to invest in strategic research, innovative management, improved public awareness and sponsorship of new generation champions. To achieve these goals, the Foundation relies on our members, donors and sponsors and our collective commitment to our motto of “Bilbies not bunnies”.

## News in Brief

### The arms race continues – myxoma vs wild rabbits

The myxoma virus found in Australia has evolved to better suppress the immune system of rabbits, according to a team of Australian and American researchers. Rabbits with a weakened immune system will also be more vulnerable to other diseases.

The team, led by Peter Kerr from the University of Sydney and CSIRO, concluded the myxoma virus had continued to evolve in wild rabbits in Australia, in a battle to overcome the selection pressure on wild rabbits to evolve genetic resistance to the disease. The findings have relevance for future rabbit control programs, and to the study of infectious diseases in general.

For more information, read the research article in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States](#).

### 90 Years & Still Changing.

#### RFA helps Koonamore.

The Koonamore vegetation monitoring reserve shows rabbit control is essential for the regeneration of many tree and shrub seedlings – and a donation from RFA is helping with re-fencing.

Thanks to funding support from RFA and others, Koonamore – the longest running vegetation monitoring project in Australia – has been able to upgrade part of the reserve's rabbit-proof boundary fencing. It helps ensure the reserve continues to provide invaluable evidence about the ecology of semi-arid Australia.

Officially titled the TGB Osborn Vegetation Reserve, Koonamore Station, the 4km square reserve is managed by the University of Adelaide and an enthusiastic team of volunteers, lecturers past and present, and students. The site is used by students and researchers from both Adelaide and Flinders universities.

For more information, see '[90 Years of Change. The TGB Osborn Vegetation Reserve, Koonamore](#)'.

### Grants for rabbit control

The Victorian Rabbit Action Network is supporting a Victorian grants program to help with rabbit control.

For more information, see the article in [The Courier](#).

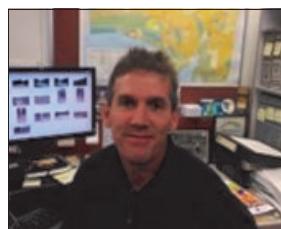
### Additional rabbit bio-control feasibility to be studied.

Plans are afoot to investigate the potential to add two parasites to the armoury in the battle against wild rabbits.

*Eimeria intestinalis* and *Eimeria faecescens* are infectious rabbit parasites that have been detected in south west WA, but not anywhere else on mainland Australia. If verified this may be due to a unique rabbit introduction to this region. They are recognised as the two most virulent rabbit coccidian parasites, with the capacity to both reduce body condition and cause mortality, and are known to be absent from a number of sites in NSW and Qld.

A project to be funded through the new Centre for Invasive Species Solutions will use genetic testing to sample a wider range of rabbit populations to determine if the parasites' occurrence is as restricted as it currently appears. If it is, then there may be prospect to spread the parasites as additional bio-controls for Australia's worst vertebrate pest. This project was an outcome of an earlier project assessing the potential of new rabbit biocontrols.

Dr David Peacock (below), from Biosecurity SA, will lead the project, with genetic analyses to be undertaken by Dr Adam Croxford using a genetic sequencing machine located at the Waite precinct.



### Enlisting flies to track the spread of RHDV

RFA has funded a novel project to help track the spread of rabbit viruses across Australia.

It is now accepted that flies are a vector for the transmission of RHDV, thanks in part to former research by Amy Ianella which was also supported by RFA. Research has also shown that flies could be used as a proxy to measure the spread of the virus within rabbit populations.

It is often difficult to source rabbit carcasses to detect the presence of RHDV, especially in remote locations, but flies may be relatively easily trapped and frozen for storage. Hence the interest in engaging flies to assist in virus tracking.

However, there is currently no means to efficiently sample flies for RHD viruses.

That is where the RFA 'Monitoring RHDV in flies' project comes in. Dr Adam Croxford, at the University of Adelaide, will use RFA and PIRSA funding to try and develop a method for optimum extraction of RHDV viral RNA from bulk samples of flies. If successful, the technique may then be applied to process fly samples collected from regional and remote areas. A better sampling option will make it much easier to monitor and understand the spread and interactions between various forms of RHDV, resulting in better rabbit control programs.

For more information on the project proposal, see '[Monitoring RHDV in flies](#)'.

### 10 Billion Rabbits

Author of 'Those Wild Rabbits', Bruce Munday, is interviewed on the ABC Radio's 'Conversations'.

Listen to the [ABC interview](#) for some great yarns about bunnies and their control.