

The Australian Pest Animal Strategy

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Abstract

The Australian rangelands are inhabited by a variety of vertebrate pest animals including rabbits, foxes, and wild dogs, and feral camels, goats, pigs and cats. These pests cause environmental damage through their predatory and browsing activities and economic impacts through forage and stock losses, damage to infrastructure and associated management costs. The Australian Pest Animal Strategy (APAS) was recently developed by the national Vertebrate Pests Committee (VPC), and now provides a framework plan that has been endorsed by all Australian governments. It sets out how the governments will work with each other, and with business, industry and the community to manage the issues and problems associated with vertebrate pest animals in Australia. In its most basic terms, the APAS aims to help prevent the introduction and spread of new pest animals, manage the impact of those that are already established, and assist the cooperation between jurisdictions and agencies that is required to achieve these goals. The APAS also describes a series of principles, objectives and actions that are intended to deliver broad national outcomes congruent with these goals. The APAS document will soon be available at www.apas.net.au, together with further descriptions and links relating to rangeland and other pests.

Introduction

The Australian rangelands are inhabited by a variety of vertebrate pests including rabbits, foxes, and wild dogs, and feral camels, goats, pigs and cats. These pests cause environmental damage through their predatory and browsing activities, and economic impacts through forage and stock losses, damage to infrastructure, and associated management costs.

Numerous agencies with national, state and regional operational bases support research studies and practical control efforts aimed at managing these pest animals. Given that the pests – like weeds and diseases – are not confined by jurisdictional and land tenure boundaries, it is apparent that best returns from these efforts will require administrative coordination between agencies and where possible, practical coordination across wide geographic areas.

The Australian Pest Animal Strategy (APAS; DEWR, 2007) was recently developed by the national Vertebrate Pests Committee (VPC), and now provides a framework plan that has been endorsed by all Australian governments. It establishes how the governments will work with each other, and with business, industry and the community to manage the issues and problems associated with vertebrate pest animals in Australia.

The APAS identifies twelve key Principles and three major Goals for pest animal management, the latter of which can be summarised as (1) preventing establishment of new pests, (2) managing the impacts of established pests, and (3) providing leadership and coordination requirements necessary for these activities.

The Strategy's subsidiary Objectives and Actions provide mechanisms to translate its Principles and Goals into a series of broadly-desirable national Outcomes. These Outcomes include overall minimisation of the risk of incursion and spread of new pest species, development of nationally-coordinated programs of research, and protection of key national assets from detrimental pest impacts. A further intended Outcome is the adoption of consistent and appropriate legislation, plans and methods for management of animal pests across the diverse landscapes of the continent. An important achievement in this 'regulatory harmonisation' activity has been in the area of animal welfare, with particular regard to ensuring that where lethal pest control activities are required, they are accomplished in a manner that is as humane as possible.

As a key step towards implementation of consistency in this area, the VPC has supported development of a suite of draft National Model Codes of Practice for Humane Pest Animal Control for seven pest species that are broadly distributed in Australia, including in rangeland settings, namely, foxes, rabbits and wild dogs, and feral goats, pigs, horses and cats. The Codes of Practice provide detailed information for pest managers to enable them identify “the most humane, target-specific, cost-effective and efficacious” techniques for pest management.

The VPC and other responsible bodies (e.g., the Animal Welfare Committee and Animal Welfare and Product Integrity Taskforce) have endorsed these Codes, and after their anticipated endorsement by the Primary Industries Standing Committee each of the jurisdictions (i.e. the Commonwealth, States and Territories) will be expected to adopt them. Given that the majority of responsibility for animal welfare and pest management issues resides with the States and Territories, this will require amendment to the various state and territory legislative instruments that regulate these activities.

As a corollary to adoption, a number of control practices that are used to reduce pest numbers, but considered to be unacceptably inhumane, will be discontinued. The outcome will be adoption of a more humane, cohesive and defensible set of practices for this unavoidable aspect of pest management, including in rangeland settings. Additional National Codes of Practice are now being prepared for other pests, including feral donkeys and feral camels. Feral camels are recognised as a major problem for Australian rangelands, with recent estimates that the current population is about one million animals, and that the population doubling time is 8-10 years (Saalfeld and Edwards, 2010). A Draft National Feral Camel Action Plan (DNFCAP; DEWHA, 2010) has recently been developed by the Vertebrate Pests Committee, consistent with all aspects of the APAS, and in particular, with the prescribed APAPS Action of identifying and listing agreed taxa as ‘Established Pest Animals of National Significance’ (EPANS).

The key criteria for identification of an EPANS are firstly, and by definition, agreement that the pest is ‘established’ in Australia, and thus not amenable to attempts at eradication, and

secondly, that there is agreement by VPC that implementation of broadly-coordinated management processes will assist in reduction of their impact.

In the case of camels, where the geographic distribution of the pest population covers some 3.3 million km² of remote rangeland landscape across WA, SA, the NT and Queensland (Saalfeld and Edwards, 2010), and where individual animals range very widely across jurisdictional and land tenure boundaries (Lethbridge *et al.* 2010), there is little doubt about the importance of coordinated management.

The intentions of the DNFCAP are also fully consistent with the other guiding principles of the APAS, and in particular, that pest management activities should be risk-based and strategic in nature, and should aim to reduce impacts of the pest population, rather than simply reduce pest animal numbers.

It is expected that other pests will be identified in EPANS listings in the relatively near future, and that the same APAS principles will also be applied in those instances.

Finally, while providing considerable focus on the many variations of incidence and influence of pest animals, it should not be overlooked that a key aspect of the APAS is its declaration that Australian jurisdictions and their agencies will interact and cooperate with each other to deliver best practice pest management outcomes. Such a statement clearly encompasses pest management in rangeland settings, but additionally empowers the coordinated delivery of these activities across the many other natural and modified environments of the nation.

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