



14 May 2016

Animal Review  
Natural Resources Commission  
GPO Box 5341  
Sydney NSW 2001

We take this opportunity to submit comments on the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) “Shared Problem, Shared Solutions Pest Animal Management Review”, Draft Report March 2016. Our submission focuses on feral deer and our first-hand experience of the negative impacts on our agricultural business and surrounding environment. We have commented on the draft recommendations, highlighting those we believe important for success of effective pest animal management based on our knowledge and experience.

### **Our background**

We are graziers with property located in the [REDACTED] Region. We run a successful cattle and sheep farming business that is our primary income source. Currently, we run approximately 400 Hereford cattle and 500 XB ewes and have been farming in the general locality for three generations. Other family members have similar sized farming businesses within close proximity and our children plan to continue to farm in the future.

We acknowledge that in order for our farming business to remain viable, effective pest and weed management is paramount. We are proud of the way we manage our pests and weeds, having sound and successful management plans in place that includes a range of proven control measures. However, current legislation makes this difficult, such as the *Game and Feral Animal Control Act. 2012*.

Our property consists of mostly supered improved pastures with some native pastures and areas of Eucalyptus woodlands. Our property borders [REDACTED] National Park, which is comprised of large tracts of Eucalyptus forests.

### **Our observations and control strategies**

We have witnessed deer exponentially increase in numbers over the last 15 years, arriving at the immense population that now exists in the area. It is not uncommon for us to see mobs of 50 to 100 and estimate we can run around 300+ head of deer at any one time.

During the 1990’s it was unusual to see a deer. Now it is unusual not to see deer. Fallow deer are the main breed present, however Samba and Red deer are now on the increase in the area. This is a real concern to us as their DSE rate is much higher and their impact to our business will be far greater if their numbers increase to that of the Fallow.

In pre-deer days, paddocks closer to the timbered country were our best, with lots of pasture coverage. Now these are eaten down so much by deer that we have been forced to lower our stocking rates to avoid pastures degrading.

We have observed that deer favour habitats consisting of a timbered landscape bordering improved agricultural paddocks. It is also our observation that deer generally do not live deep within forests but hang on the fringe, grazing our pastures at night and taking cover within forests during the day.

We have identified and rated deer in our Risk Management Plan as having a major impact to our business viability and need to ensure that the likelihood is managed downward to prevent an extreme consequence.

### **Control strategies**

Our deer control strategy over the past 15 years include using recreational hunters and spotlighting ourselves. Currently, these are the only two measures available. During this time, we have encountered many negative associations with recreational hunters. Consequently, those we give permission to assist us in our deer control strategy need to demonstrate they possess the required skills to be effective, demonstrate safe and best practise, have the same control attitude, abide by our rules, are appropriately insurance and not be a hindrance. We also maintain that if given permission this is a privilege, not a right.

It is our experience that the majority of recreational hunters only target the trophy letting female deer and other pest animals go. In addition, we are continually pestered by recreational hunters via telephone, mail and dropping in to request access. Furthermore, due to the current legislation it is difficult for recreational hunters to shoot the numbers we need as they cannot legally spotlight and are restricted to a shooting season. There is also a biosecurity risk associated with allowing hunters onto our property, as there is the possibility of bringing in unwanted weed seeds from their vehicles and attire. We have suffered from this in the past with one group of hunters that we can directly relate a serrated tussock infestation to, that we now have the problem to eradicate and monitor. Prior to this incident, we did not have serrated tussock on our property. We have come to the conclusion, with the exception of a few trusted relationships we have developed, that using recreational hunters has been more of a hindrance, is time consuming and not helpful in our aim to reduce deer numbers on our property.

We shoot 300+ deer annually, mainly from our spotlighting activities. Spotlighting activities are by far the most effective component of our deer control strategy, however it is still not sufficient to negate the detrimental impacts the deer are having. We clearly need other methods such as baiting and trapping to become available to us.

Even though we have been trying to reduce deer numbers the concern is that we have noticed a remarkable increase in numbers particularly over the last year where numbers have exploded with females and young everywhere. We believe this is a result of:

- only a portion of landholders and land managers adopt adequate deer control strategies,
- legislation limits deer control measures essentially protecting deer,
- a run of very good seasons (deer we cull are in excellent condition), and
- no real predators.

### **Cost and impacts**

We estimate that deer costs our business lost income of around \$50K annually due to reduced carrying capacity. There are also increased costs to our business associated with repairing fences damaged by deer. On one occasion deer had completed ruined the netting of a brand new fence within 1 week of erecting the fence. Now we only erect all wire and barb fencing, which is usually inadequate to fence crossbred sheep. Consequently, this has increased our workload to manage our sheep enterprise.

Due to the current legislation, the ongoing human resource required for spotlighting activities by us as owners is unsustainable. At present, we are trying to spotlight at least once a week aiming for three

times a week. This is very difficult to maintain particularly if you have just done a hard day's work of shearing, cattle marking, lamb marking, fencing, weed spraying etc.

Deer frequent our dams competing with stock for precious water resources.

The adjoining national park and our forested property is noticeably modified from continual deer browsing resulting in the understory being non-existent in some instances.

### **Our efforts to date to get deer recognised as feral to expand our control options**

We approached the then Rural Lands Protection Board when the increase in deer numbers was starting to concern us and impact our business. At the time, RLPB indicated they could not provide any assistance, mainly as deer were classified as game. Interestingly, they did not know or advise about any provisions within legislation such as deer control orders and adopting management plans. We felt we were on our own and that the legislation needed to be changed.

We made representations to local MPs, Ministers and NSW Farmers in 2013 shortly after the disbanding of the Game Council in an attempt to gain traction and attention. This was fruitless and we were advised that there was no plan to change the legislation and our attention was drawn to the provisions in the *Game and Feral Animal Control Regulation 2012* and the *Deer Act 2006*.

On this advice, we thought we should try to pursue these two provisions. Interestingly we have experienced there is confusion around both provisions. Over the last year, we have communicated with several government departments with no clear understanding of what the process actually is.

We are in the final stages of writing a deer management plan for the area and would like to see this adopted by the local wild dog committee. We are still working through this process with government departments, however the onus has been on us to write the plan and drive the process. There appears to be a lot of unnecessary red tape that needs time and energy by us. We are only trying to implement an effective deer control management strategy, which should not be this difficult.

As farmers, we feel exasperated that the NSW legislation is such that it provides protection for deer. This needs to change. It is plain to us that current legislation does not provide adequate measures to control deer effectively. In our opinion, deer is an emerging pest animal and if appropriate measures are not implemented soon, negative impacts will continue to increase at an alarming rate across an even wider area. Deer are now firmly entrenched in our area and the associated negative impacts are clearly demonstrated.

### **Comments on Draft Report and Recommendations**

We have found the NRC review comprehensive and take this opportunity to congratulate the NRC for doing such a great job. We agree with the overall approach and commend the panel on the information conveyed at the recent workshop held at Parramatta. It was informative and professionally delivered.

We agree that if we are to successfully control pest animals, a cross-tenure approach is paramount. We also agree with the three tiered governance structure underpinned by well-founded strategies and plans that are periodically reviewed to determine success. However, it is important that governance is efficient and effective and does not consume funding that could be directed to achieve much needed on ground results.

**We are extremely pleased to see the recommendation to declare deer as feral and that the current protection measures should be removed. This will open up many more opportunities to include deer in local pest management plans, but more importantly allow farmers and landholders more options to**

**control deer. We also support recommendations for research into other control measures for deer such as baiting and trapping and that this is made available for wider use as soon as possible to supplement existing control measures. We also recommend that work is completed around estimating deer populations and present locations within the landscape.**

We support the recommendation of strong enforcement measures and agree that these are necessary to encourage compliance particularly from those that do not undertake adequate action to control pest animals on their land. While we continually suppress and cull deer on our land, some adjoining landholders do not. In particular, one adjoining landholder owns significant acreage that is mostly forested. They run a wilderness tourist venture and encourage populations of deer, brumbies, and other wildlife being one of the tourist attractions. No animal pest control measures are done which in turn impacts adjoining landholders and the carrying capacity of our paddocks that adjoin this land. We estimate that we run 100+ deer in these paddocks alone, with deer seeking refuge in the adjoining forested areas during the day while grazing on our improved pastures at night.

We support draft recommendations that address new and emerging risks of pest animals by focusing on risk pathways, surveillance and education, whilst ensuring funds to respond to these risks are readily available. We believe that if this was the case when we first contacted the then Rural Lands Protection Board about deer we may have had something in place to suppress deer across the area and not be in the situation we now face.

We agree with draft recommendations around improved engagement and education. This will help in changing community perception, particularly in urban areas where many associate deer with Bambi and being cute.

The idea of a regional pest management coordinator has merit but this key role may be spread a bit thin if regional boundaries would be that of the LLS. The success of this role will revolve around employing suitable and motivated staff but also it is important that there is enough funding to allocate to local plans and on-ground works. Repeatedly, we have experienced government departments that are underfunded and unable to adequately undertake their roles and responsibilities.

We do not agree with using recreational hunting groups in regional pest animal management. From our experience, these groups can often introduce a separate range of problems. Many do not possess the appropriate skill set and are costly to manage. Many of the target species could be effectively managed using other measures such as baiting, trapping and aerial shooting. We have found that the majority of recreational hunters are after the trophy and not interested in culling large numbers required to make a difference. As the name implies it is a recreational pastime and the motivators are different from that of landholders interested in controlling pest animals. It would be more effective and efficient to engage specialist contractors that have the experience and skill base required.

Finally, we look forward to the NSW Government putting in place the draft recommendations that have been well formulated that will provide NSW a solid foundation to achieve more successfully holistic pest animal management. We believe that it would be very remiss of the NSW Government, if they do not seriously take note of this report and put into action the draft recommendations particularly those supported above.

Yours faithfully

