

**Blue Mountains Field Sports  
Association Incorporated**

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NSW Natural Resources Commission

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**Submissions regarding the State-wide review of NSW pest animal management**

**About BMFSA**

Blue Mountains Field Sports Association Incorporated (BMFSA) is a small recreational hunting club based in the upper Blue Mountains of NSW. Its members mostly live in the Blue Mountains, but some reside in parts of Sydney, the mid North Coast and Lithgow.

The members represent a very wide demographic, comprising professional people, academics, businessmen, tradesmen, outdoor adventure guiding, teachers, high school students and a number of retired people. Besides recreational hunting, many of our members engage in bushwalking, bird watching, wildlife study, speleology, wildlife conservation, photography and fishing.

The Association provides training for its members in respect of firearm safety, and outdoor skills, knowledge and safety. It does not as an organisation conduct any form of hunting activity.

A small number of the Association's members carry out voluntary culling of pest animals for landholders, and some have a particularly good reputation locally in that regard. Others prefer a more contemplative approach to recreational hunting, enjoying the whole of the outdoor experience and regarding taking of game as a bonus.

**Approach taken in these submissions**

These submissions are loosely structured in accordance with the issues paper, using the same but not all the headings therein, presented in bold capitals.

We have only responded where we think we may have some observation or insight to offer that may be of some use.

If a response to a particular question in the Issues Paper is provided, the relevant question is used as a heading in bold italics.

### **3.1 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Table 2. Summary of responsibilities for pest management in NSW describes Department of Primary Industries role as *Legislation and policy framework, range of responsibilities from raising awareness to conducting research to leading recovery programs*

In fact, DPI has a much wider role, including responsibility for the administration of the Game and Feral Animal Control Act.

#### ***1. Are roles and responsibilities for pest animal management clear at the state, regional or local scales?***

No – for example, peri-urban fox control in the Blue Mountains is absolutely mired in cross jurisdictional (and regulatory) issues.

According to a pamphlet recently obtained from Blue Mountains City Council, such control (or more correctly, the lack thereof) seems to be under review by a steering committee comprising representatives of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Blue Mountains City Council, Sydney Catchment Authority, NSW Agriculture, Rural Lands Protection Board (now LLS, one assumes), Blue Mountains World heritage Institute, Blue Mountains Conservation Society, the community and a local veterinarian.

Meanwhile, Katoomba residents on the urban fringe suffer high losses of domestic poultry (unless their poultry run is very robust), swamp wallaby (*wallabia bicolor*) numbers are down, the wood ducks struggle to raise any young, and suspicious clusters of bird plumage are to be readily observed here and there.

One of our members was asked by a neighbour who'd lost all his ducks to foxes to shoot some foxes but our member felt he had to decline because, although he was satisfied that it could be done with no risk to public safety, the prevailing hysteria surrounding firearms made the exercise too risky from a regulatory point of view. The neighbour had apparently sought assistance from various public authorities but had received no practical or effective assistance.

#### ***2. What works well with the current institutional arrangements?***

Recreational hunting in state forests has produced a sustained pressure on pest mammal populations.

Members of our Association who had held permits to hunt in state forests under the regime prior to the commencement of the Game & Feral Animal Control Act report that whereas they would typically take tallies in excess of 80 feral goats per day in Hampton State Forest, for example, it is now difficult to take any. At most, one might get 3 or 4, but more usually in the range of 0 - 2.

While some of the decrease in goats taken probably reflects the goats becoming more wary under hunting pressure, a noticeable improvement to the understory in the native vegetation areas of Hampton State Forest has been observed since the advent of recreational hunting

under the Game & Feral Animal Control Act; evidence of a real reduction in the abundance of feral goats.

Similar observations have been made in respect of other state forests with which our members have been familiar over some decades.

These observations are, of course, anecdotal. However, they reflect real experiences.

Some wildlife managers, accustomed to the rigours and tidiness of scientific method, may have difficulty with the notion of diffuse and informal control methods, such as is the case with recreational hunting under the G&FAC Act. The fact is that while there is significant variability in tallies taken by individual hunters, implying significant variability in relevant skills and knowledge etc., the numbers of hunters regularly visiting the forests maintain an ongoing negative pressure on the abundance of pest species, and do so at little cost. (As to which, one notes, a large part of the budget of the DPI Game Licensing Unit is directed towards things such as training, which are of a general nature and value, rather than being specifically directed specifically towards management of pest animals. It is not a valid exercise to take the whole of the budget and divide by the tallies for the year and suggest that that figure be accepted as an appropriate costing.)

### **3.2 SHARED OWNERSHIP**

We wish to make an important point that necessarily refers to the non-commercial culling (occupiers' culling) of kangaroos. We do not seek to debate the issue as to kangaroos, but rather to point out the impact that ill-considered policies have on pest animal distribution and abundance.

Besides the common complaint that National Parks can be a refuge for pest animals, there is another way in which NPWS policies affect pest animal problems beyond the National Park estate, significantly bolstering the populations of pest animals such as foxes and feral dogs and pigs on private land.

The situation arises from the standard terms of the occupiers permit for non-commercial culling of kangaroos, which requires that the kangaroo carcasses (or any part thereof) are not to leave the subject property. Accordingly, the carcasses are usually left where the animal was shot, and become a critical food resource for pest animals such as foxes and feral dogs and pigs.

In relation to one property in the Central Tablelands, the owner reported no evidence of either foxes or feral pigs being observed in the several decades in which he had owned and operated the property. No kangaroos had been culled on the property in recent decades. It was reported that no foxes or feral pigs were observed for the first few nights (spread over a period of about 10 days) that culling took place. However, after about 10 – 15 days following commencement of kangaroo culling, foxes and feral pigs were regularly seen, often feeding on kangaroo carcasses remaining from previous nights' culling.

It may be asked why the person doing the culling did not pick up the carcasses. The answer is simply that landholders carrying out their own culling report that a lot of precious time is taken up in conducting the culling, and time does not permit collection and disposal of carcasses.

Obviously, judicious variation of the standard terms of the non-commercial culling permits would minimise the number of carcasses available for pest animals to feed on.

The terms of the licences and permits are discretionary. Variation would require no legislative change.

Fears that removal of the carcasses would open a back door to commercial culling disguised as mitigation culling could be addressed by upgrading the tags to the form of a cable tie type of tag that once fastened to a carcass could not be re-used, and would evidence the legal status of the carcass.

In short; poorly considered NPWS policies as to the discretionary terms of non-commercial culling of kangaroos in effect subsidise pest animals such as foxes and feral dogs and pigs on private land.

### **3.3 PRIORITY PEST SPECIES**

Wild dogs should have high priority. From our discussions with landholders, it would seem that predation by wild dogs has been a significant factor in graziers giving up on sheep and raising beef cattle instead. As remarked below, cattle can cause a lot of environmental damage, especially unfenced stock impacting adversely on streams and water quality.

Wild dogs also compromise the safety of those engaged in outdoor activities. A number of our members who once hiked (note that *bushwalking* was coined for those who chose to explore off the beaten track) in National Parks have given up such activity in a number of parks that have a particular problem with wild dogs. An associate reports being forced to retreat as dog packs came quite close and engaged in menacing behaviour (raised hackles etc.) Human safety and amenity do not appear to figure much (compared to other issues) in the official contemplation of wild dogs but for outdoors people it can be significant.

Foxes and feral cats should have equally high priority, given the fact that removal of foxes can simply remove a competitor of cats), and especially having regard to their impact on bird life. (A number of our members are keen bird watchers and feel quite strongly about this issue.)

Wild goats are extremely destructive of vegetation and landscapes (some of our members have observed damage to picturesque rock formations in National Parks apparently caused by wild goats trampling and rubbing against fragile sandstone formations hewn by the wind over many millennia. In areas invaded by wild goats, a marked decline in the numbers and variety of small birds dependent upon an intact understory has been noted.

### **3.5 EMERGING ISSUES**

#### **1. What do you see as the priority emerging issues, risks or opportunities?**

Feral cattle are increasingly a problem. One of our members operates and lives on a cattle property on the mid north coast of NSW. He reports that feral cattle, especially the bulls, are

a very significant problem for his farm, particularly around May each year, as they leave the nearby State Forest, seeking receptive cows on farmland. Apart from damage to fences and disruption of breeding programmes, these feral cattle are dangerous, and have attacked people resulting in hospitalisation of at least one casualty. However, the relevant state forests have not been gazetted for hunting under the Game & Feral Animal Control Act.

Feral cattle are also problem in some State Forests in the Central Tablelands. Although such of these cattle as we are aware do not seem to be a particular threat to human safety, the cattle inflict significant damage on environmentally sensitive areas, simply by reason of their weight, and by reason of the sheer volume of dung produced. The latter has a particularly adverse impact on water resources. Compared to feral pigs, the cattle inflict about 1,000 times the damage. This is because feral pig numbers are kept under constant pressure by recreational hunters, whereas the taking of feral cattle by recreational hunters is not specifically permitted under the usual terms of the hunting permit for a state forest.

***Q2. Is increasing peri-urbanisation influencing pest management in rural areas?***

The short answer is yes, absolutely. In many places (Mudgee, Hargraves, Megalong Valley, for example) which our older members have visited over many decades, the members report having seen increased pest animal problems (and problems with roaming domestic dogs). Because of the relatively small landholdings, it has become virtually impossible to effectively manage pest animals such as foxes. This is because of the difficulty in achieving some sort of coordination with a relatively large number of often absent neighbours.

***Q 4. Should governments encourage the establishment of industries that commercially harvest pest animals such as goats, foxes and carp for economic gain?***

Yes.

Some effort should be being made to expand markets for pest animal products. For example, marketing the view that a person choosing to wear an Australian fox fur garment is not only subsidising the removal of a pest animal but are also contributing to conservation of native animals, could rebut the silliness of the anti-fur campaign. While a number of wildlife managers baulk at any suggestion along such lines (having little or no expertise in marketing and communications), an attempt should be made to experiment with it. A multi-faceted approach would be required at the social and political level, and approaches should be made to opinion leaders who may be sympathetic to feature in such a campaign.

The potential for savings could be significant. During the time of high prices for fox skins, not only were few foxes to be observed on the farm or in the bush, but no one seemed to be spending money on fox control, with obvious savings to the management of public or private of land. While the removal of foxes was diffuse, uncoordinated and haphazard, the sheer number of foxes taken for commercial purposes (510,000 exported from Australia in 1979-80; *Improving Fox Management Strategies in Australia*, Saunders & McLeod 2007) kept fox numbers generally at a point where they were of little concern. The reduction in overall population would have made it much more feasible to virtually eradicate foxes in areas of

special concern, owing to lack of population pressure pushing in foxes to replace those removed.

It has also been commonly observed when hunting feral pig for export as game meat was more common, it was becoming increasingly difficult for recreational hunters to find wild pigs. Such commercial hunting seems to have declined with the need to spend a significant sum (about \$500 per annum) for accreditation. This seems to have impacted on the part time commercial hunter resulting in fewer hunter numbers. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-14/wild-boar-market-hit-by-dropping-hunter-numbers/6383368> ) It could be worthwhile investigating the cost-effectiveness of subsidising the accreditation, perhaps on a pro-rata basis, with the extent of subsidy depend on the numbers on animals taken.

### **3.7 Knowledge building**

Proper scientific research is vital. However, it is doubtful that scientists make the best wildlife managers (although their work should inform management).

There is also an anti-hunting bias amongst too many wildlife researchers. The author recalls, for example, hearing a speaker at an AWMS conference making odious comparisons in respect of some research being carried out in the north of West Australia between the efforts of voluntary recreational hunters using their four wheel drives to get about and the eventual availability of a helicopter with professional shooter. Obviously there is a quantum difference in cost and technical capability between the two that defied any rational comparison being made.

There is scope for better knowledge of social and cultural differences, which can impact on the success of control programmes. Unfortunately, many wildlife and pest animal managers seem to have poor human engagement skills and that detracts from their effectiveness. It is only when one has the pleasure of meeting an effective communicator from the Local Land Services group, for example, that one appreciates just how important this is. Rather than leaving possession of such facility to chance, surely there is scope for making use of existing expertise from outside the pest animal/wildlife management world to build the expertise where it is needed.

### **General observations and issues**

We think that too much dogma tends to distort the development of pest animal control policies. For example, one frequently hears that “bounties do not work”. In fact, as a matter of well-established economic principle, as to the relationship between price and supply, it would be more accurate to assert, if anything, that affordable bounties do not work. Obviously if the bounty that is offered is sufficient, any number of pest animals may be removed from the landscape.

Such incentives need not be in the form of traditional, fully publicly funded bounties. For example, if fox skins are successfully promoted commercially, the market price has the same effect as a bounty (a monetary incentive to remove the pest animal) but commercial interests provide the money. Building up such a commercial incentive could be subsidised by providing some leadership on the issue of the ecological desirability of consumers choosing garments made from fox skins.

Other forms of monetary incentive (bounties in effect) to remove the pest animal could be primarily funded by commerce, with a key subsidy provided by government to produce a cost effective outcome. As discussed above, subsidising an appropriate aspect of the cost of engaging

in taking wild pigs for the export market could be effected, at a relatively low overall cost to the numbers removed.

