

The average age of Australia farmers is 62. I am 62! I have been on the land for most of my working life. I am fifth generation on our family farm and sixth generation in the local district.

Our farm is now about 1,500 hectares but during recent decades covered about 2,400 hectares. Approximately 300 hectares is bushland that is not grazed, is not subject to conservation agreements and is managed for its environmental and aesthetic values at a significant annual cost. We get no help, financially or of any kind from anyone, including governments, to manage this land. We currently run about 7,000 merino sheep – previously we also had about 125 beef cows and their progeny as well. We carry out comprehensive pest animal control measures; weed control and bushfire mitigation work on an ongoing basis.

We adjoin a National Park and have some neighbours who don't manage their pests either at all, or only spasmodically. We are close to a large urban population, which sometimes precludes shooting and will impact on poisoning in the future.

I have developed accurate and workable record keeping processes for livestock, pasture, weed control and other management practices. Bait laying mapping, chemical use schedules and fence maintenance planning all form part of the dynamic management plans. I find that neighbours don't readily share information, probably as they are just as busy as I am. I also find that government statutory bodies also don't share information and that reporting and accountability are usually sadly lacking.

We pay almost all the costs and carry the financial burden – the cost of damage and loss of production; the lost and killed livestock; poor lambing percentages attributable to foxes and possibly wild dogs; loss of lambs; fencing repairs and maintenance, largely due to kangaroos and feral deer; and damage to pastures by feral pigs. We also are subject to significant bureaucratic costs, regulatory costs and obligations and other barriers to our autonomy.

Australia's 90% urbanised society places unrealistic demands and imposes unworkable and often unachievable expectations on limited farmer/landowner resources. This is one of the reasons children of farmers decide not to stay on and enter the agricultural business sector. Poor returns, impact from droughts, fires, floods and multiple pest species all contribute to the reduced rural population and a poor future for the family farm.

People living in rural areas also suffer a great disparity and many equality barriers compared to their city cousins before they can even think about pest animal control. Poor roads, little government help, increasing rates and costs, inferior internet and phone coverage, amongst other things, are the reasons why more funding and resources must be directed toward the bush. The 90% of Australians who are city bound also share in the wealth from agriculture, the national park reserves, mining and associated industries while enjoying all the society and community benefits, and the negatives, city life offers.

Today in Australia, it is nearly impossible to get good reliable employees. While contractors are a good option in some areas, they can be very expensive. Cooperative shared labour often doesn't work as farmers can't spare the time off their own properties, cooperative use of machinery sometimes doesn't work as the storage, transport and maintenance of the share resources often falls un fairly on just one or only a few of the coop. members.

There is a direct relationship between feral/pest animals and weeds. Blackberries are a harbour for rabbits and pigs, St John's Wort seed spread by native and pest animals in their fur. Effective pest animal control often means a coordinated weed infestation control program needs to be carried out at the same time.

From a general perspective, the impact of feral pest animals in forests, bush and national parks is largely invisible and hardly quantified. On the other hand, pest impact on farm lands, loss of livestock and the associated personal stress; environmental damage to pastures and native flora and fauna from pig and rabbit infestation as well as the physical damage to fences from feral deer, is easily seen and assessed and has a very real and significant financial impact on farmers and landholders.

The large area of farm land that abuts National Parks, forests and reserves is owned and managed by an aging and dwindling number of farmers who, in most cases simply, no longer have the tools and resources, the financial capacity or the support, both direct and indirect, from governments. Nor do they have the time, will and motivation to effectively manage and control the ever increasing number of pests on their properties.

In most cases these pest have come from the neighbouring public lands and private reserves where they have been subject to little or no management or control over many years. The bureaucracy and public scream lack of resources, insufficient funding, compromised philosophies and lack of political will and do nothing or at best very little while still costing the tax payer millions in wages, salaries, contracts, on costs, physical resources, offices, motor vehicles, computer modelling etc. And all the while the pest species run rampant in the public lands and cost the farmers, and indirectly the nation, millions or even billions more in lost resources and productivity.

A good example of the inefficiency of the current programs is with the resources available for wild dog control in the Brindabella – Wee Jasper area. Around \$116,000 per annum is just enough to fund one dog trapper with a vehicle. This is in a vast area, much of which is isolated and difficult to get into. There are many reports of wild dog sightings and stock losses. Most farmers who abut the whole area also contribute many thousands of dollars in their time and suffer the losses to stock. And this is only after the wild dogs have hunted and eaten almost all native fauna species within the park or forest areas. The taxpayer contribution to directly manage the problem on public lands amounts to less than the cost one public servant!

Pest animal control cannot be properly achieved without an integrated program that covers the interaction between pest species; competition for scarce food resources; and control of weeds which are a natural harbour for pests. The management activities must cover a broad area that is enclosed by natural terrain, topographic and land use boundaries. It is no use carrying out control measures on one side of the range or National Park and not the other. Many pest animals have a

vast roaming area and as young males are rejected from the birth areas, they roam for some time covering many kilometres before establishing themselves in new areas.

Farmers need direct support both individually in kind and financially. Rabbits are coming back again! Historically, after rabbits first became established, it took until WWII when many control programs were starting to work, for the rabbits to quickly bounce back when many young farmers and country men went off to fight the war. Then Myxomatosis came and again almost wiped out the rabbit, but low product returns and droughts during to 60s & 70s meant that rabbits became immune and again re-established to devastating degrees in much of the rangelands. Then Calici Virus was introduced and again this saw a very big decline in rabbit numbers during the late 80s and into the present century. But again with dwindling resources, lower prices, drought and a workforce moving towards the mining sector; along with shooting becoming less popular due to the firearm legislation; more small farm neighbours making poisoning and shooting difficult again lead to an increasing rabbit population. All of this, coupled with a more burdensome regulatory background and a quickly aging farmer population generally, with some running bigger farms and some farms simply unviable, received no help from the government or private sector. Consequently, the rabbits are again gaining a foothold – this time it may be for good!

Today many farm regions don't have many farm employees and landowners are flat out. It is often difficult or impossible to properly coordinate pest animal control measures such as fox and wild dog baiting. Livestock work schedules are often set well in advance and farmers who use dogs may need to work them every day for a few weeks at a time. Most farmers don't all shear or crutch or drench at the same time. Furthermore, some landowners may even have conscientious objections to some control measures.

The following lists the pest animals that impact us and other landowners and farmers in our local district.

- Dingos – have been seen and shot on our property or on neighbouring farms. We have lost sheep from wild dog attacks.
- Foxes - are a constant sight even after baiting and shooting programs. They reinfest our property from neighbours, river corridors and National Parks constantly. They have a significant impact on our annual lambing and evidently the native fauna as well. Another bio-security risk with wild dogs, dingoes and foxes is the spread of hydatids.
- Pigs destroy hectares of pasture land and waterways every year and also cause some fence damage.
- Deer compete with livestock, destroy young stringy bark trees and ruin netting fences.
- Rabbits again pose a renewed threat to farm lands they impact on pasture lands and native fauna habitat.
- The bio-security risk when fences are significantly damaged is that sheep will easily wander to neighbouring paddocks and neighbouring farms posing a major risk to disease quarantine and disease control. This is a major risk factor to quality control and a constant source of stress to farmers.
- Which ones can I afford to prioritise this season?

Once local food sources are depleted, most pest animals quickly move on to new areas. Usually the first choice is in the bush and forested areas where adequate protection is readily available. Once all or most target prey or food resources are significantly depleted, the vermin move on to farm lands. The area between farmland and the native bush areas is often heavily hunted and used for cover by pest species and then the farm land animals - sheep, cattle and fowl etc. - are seen by the pest species and become obvious prey.

Like farming and heavy industry, much of the pest animal control work is hands-on. Long hours in a dirty and often dangerous wild work place must be the focal point of any effective management plan. Computer modelling, aerial baiting and the necessary mapping, meetings, reporting and follow up work are the softer side but must only come after planning; notification; talking to the landholders or agency workers. Understanding the pest animal species and, perhaps more importantly, the individual animals involved is necessary before then planning to track, trap, bait and/or shoot. Travelling to locations where individual animals and packs have recently been seen or recent evidence sighted is a preliminary to plans. This may include placing hunting cameras to identify animals and their activity and finally carrying out accurate, timely and effective control measures.

In conclusion, pest animal management and control needs a much higher priority from all the relevant government agencies. Funding must be increased to implement adequate proactive fully integrated control programs. The full impact, including the stress factors on landholders needs to be accurately quantified and reported back to the agencies, landholders and then on to the general public. Without this knowledge and an understanding of the sizable and ongoing threat that most pest animals are to farm lands, agricultural productivity, future family farms and associated small businesses, as well as the impact on vulnerable threatened species in public parks and reserves, state forests and private reserves in Australia the general public simply cannot be the "Eyes and Ears" and play any meaningful role in the effective management of this issue for all Australians.

Peter Webb

