RESPONSE TO PETITION

TITLE OF PETITION: Rabbit Infestations in Tasmania

The petition of the undersigned Citizens of Tasmania draw to the attention of the House:
the significant issues faced by rural and peri-urban communities in Tasmania due to significant increases in the population of rabbits around Tasmania and the damage being caused by this introduced, invasive species to the environment and infrastructure in these communities.

Your petitioners request that the House call on the Government to:

- Work with the Federal Government to secure a reliable means of controlling the invasive rabbit population in Tasmania beyond the reliance on a single laboratory,
- Work with the Federal Government and landowners to develop alternative biocontrol measures to mitigate the exponentially increasing rabbit populations,
- Create a grant scheme that will fairly compensate community groups, organisations, departments, and farmers in exceptional circumstances who have used their own resources to deal with the plague impacts caused by government inaction, including to rebuild structures compromised by warrens.

GOVERNMENT POSITION:

Work with the Federal Government to secure a reliable means of controlling the invasive rabbit population in Tasmania beyond the reliance on a single laboratory

There was a nationwide shortage of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV or calicivirus) in 2024 due to difficulties associated with obtaining critical laboratory reagents required to produce the virus. The Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania (NRE Tas) was on a waiting list with other jurisdictions for the virus to become available. Importantly, sufficient virus supplies were secured to undertake a comprehensive calicivirus release in Autumn this year.

In Australia, RHDV1 is only manufactured at the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Primary Industry - Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute. The virus is sold in a freeze-dried form at a cost of approximately $120 per vial.

The virus itself is reproduced in live rabbits which have been specifically bred in closed environments to ensure that the rabbits have not been exposed to calicivirus. It takes numerous rabbits at each stage of the process to produce one vial of RHDV1 and it is a highly specialised process.

The NSW Department of Primary Industry has recently brought the rabbit breeding component of virus production inhouse, with the intent of safeguarding a constant supply of rabbits to allow a consistent production of the virus.

Given the complexity of production and the comparatively small quantities of virus required for Tasmanian use, producing RHDV1 within Tasmania would not be a cost-effective proposition at this time.

It is understood that the CSIRO is currently researching the use of rabbit organoid systems (3D cell culture systems that mimic miniature organs) for growing and studying rabbit caliciviruses in vitro. Should this development come to fruition, it could greatly reduce the cost of virus production and widen its scope.

Work with the Federal Government and landowners to develop alternative biocontrol measures to mitigate the exponentially increasing rabbit populations

The Tasmanian Government uses science-backed wild rabbit control methods and is supportive of alternative rabbit control technologies being developed. The development of such technologies requires research to determine their practical application, suitability in the environment and the public's acceptance or social licence to implement them.

This work is being guided at a national level through 'Australia's Rabbit Biocontrol Pipeline Strategy' (Australias-Rabbit-Biocontrol-Pipeline-Strategy.pdf), which was released last year and has been endorsed by all Australian governments at both the State and Federal levels. The Strategy outlines ten recommendations to improve the use of existing biocontrol agents and develop new biocontrol tools.

One of the key recommendations of the Strategy is to undertake proof-of-concept studies on the technical feasibility of genetic biocontrols for rabbits modelled on successful strategies applied in model vertebrate organisms.

The Strategy, developed by an experienced group of scientists from NSW, South Australia and Victorian Government agencies and the CSIRO, also highlights the importance of better integration of biological control with conventional controls, as well as an increased focus in extension and adoption methods.

Create a grant scheme that will fairly compensate community groups, organisations, departments, and farmers in exceptional circumstances who have used their own resources to deal with the plague impacts caused by government inaction, including to rebuild structures compromised by warrens.

Asset protection, and shared responsibility between government, industry and land managers, are accepted principles for the management of invasive species in Tasmania and nationally. The General Biosecurity Duty (GBD) in the *Biosecurity Act 2019* (Tas) reinforces the notion of "shared responsibility" through the general biosecurity duty, which directly places responsibility on people and entities to avoid creating biosecurity risks and impacts.

For established pests such as wild rabbits, landowners have primary responsibility for managing rabbits on their land. The Government's role is to support land managers/owners, through maintaining a regulatory framework and providing advice on best practice. NRE Tas delivers a rabbit management program that supports landowners and statutory land managers to control rabbits impacting on the land they own or manage. They also assist landowners through providing baiting services using Pindone and biocontrol using calicivirus when conditions are suitable. NRE Tas has been undertaking a comprehensive calicivirus release in the Autumn of 2025 to support landowners and land managers who are experiencing rabbit impacts.

Creating and delivering a Rabbit Impacts Grant Compensation Scheme would be expensive, complex to administer, and could perversely discourage landowners and land managers from proactively managing rabbits on their land. Such compensation schemes have not been found to be cost-effective and no other State Government has such a scheme in place at this time.

Landowners can obtain information about rabbit control techniques and developing a rabbit control program from the NRE Tas website at: https://nre.tas.gov.au/invasive-species/invasive-animals/invasive-mammals/european-rabbits. They can also contact Biosecurity Tasmania at biosecurity.tasmania@nre.tas.gov.au or on 6165 3777 should they wish to discuss rabbit management options for their property.

Background

Rabbits have been described as Australia's most economically significant vertebrate pest (Cook et al. 2013), with substantial impacts on both agricultural and environmental values (Commonwealth of Australia 2015). Wild rabbits are widespread throughout Tasmania and therefore eradication is not considered viable. Control programs delivered by Government must therefore be linked to high priority outcomes and the protection of shared values, such as high value agricultural assets and significant environmental values.

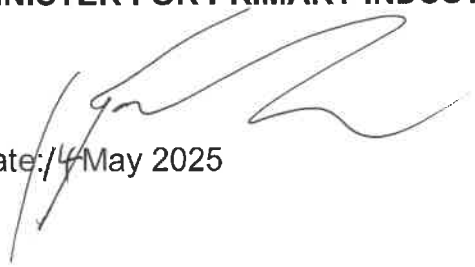
There are agreed management principles and goals identified in national and State frameworks and strategies underpinning established pest management work. These include: The Framework for the National Management of Established Pests and Diseases of National Significance (National Biosecurity Committee, 2016), developed as part of Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity (IGAB); the Tasmanian Biosecurity Strategy 2013-2017; and Biosecurity Tasmania's Strategic Plan (2019-2024).

These documents promote asset protection as the management aim for established species; the importance of shared responsibility; the value of cooperative approaches / partnerships between stakeholders; government support of industry and community groups, and Government as the sole investor only where they are the public asset manager.

Biosecurity Tasmania's Strategic Plan (BT, 2019) identifies core services, including: the provision of support and advice to land managers; maintenance of biosecurity awareness; and engagement programs promoting shared responsibility. Also relevant are the enforcement of agriculture and veterinary chemical regulations and upholding appropriate animal welfare standards. A key objective of implementing these principles is that management and control options by Government for established species concentrate on public benefit and supporting strategic actions by others. Doing so ensures that our limited resources can be directed towards prevention and incursion response, rather than the ongoing, resource-hungry management of established species. The Government intends to continue to manage and deliver the strategic release of biological control agents (calicivirus) while educating land managers and service providers that calicivirus is one of a suite of management tools.

Jane Howlett MP

MINISTER FOR PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND WATER



Date: 4 May 2025