

Purpose

Bass Coast Shire Council's Coast and Bushland Rabbit control program is conducted in order to:

- Minimize the biodiversity impacts of rabbits in conservation areas within these reserves.
- Minimize the impacts of rabbits on public open space within these reserves.
- Minimize the spread of rabbits from these reserves to adjacent private land (i.e. being a responsible land manager).

Background

Impacts of rabbits on Coast and Bushland Reserves

Rabbits cause significant impacts on both public and private land in the Bass Coast. In Council-managed Coast and Bushland Reserves these impacts include:

Biodiversity impact, e.g.:

- Native Vegetation
 - Due to their grazing rabbits have the ability to impact the recruitment of certain native plant species.
- Native Fauna
 - The impact of rabbits on native vegetation impacts the habitat of some native fauna.
 - At high densities rabbits have the ability to compete with native fauna such as penguins and shearwaters and can destabilize coastal dunes (i.e. animal habitat).

Impact on public open spaces, e.g.:

- Impact on lawn surfaces and risk of personal injury due to uneven surfaces.

Impact on urban private land, e.g.:

- Gardens, lawns, buildings (e.g. footings).

Program Status

An ongoing rabbit control program is conducted in Council-managed Coast and Bushland Reserves in order to minimize the impact of rabbits on biodiversity and public open spaces within these reserves. As a responsible land manager Council also aims to minimize the spread of rabbits from Coast and Bushland Reserves to adjacent private land.

At present, Council's Coast and Bushland Team is supervising a licensed contractor to undertake a baiting program using Pindone oat bait at locations including: Ventnor, Red Rocks, Cowes, Rhyll, Newhaven, Cape Woolamai and Kilcunda foreshores; the Smiths Beach Drainage Reserve and the Screw Creek Reserve at Inverloch.

Minimizing the impacts of baiting on non-target animal species

A number of methods are employed to minimize the risk to non-target animal species including wallabies, birds and domestic dogs. These include:

Informing the community:

- One reason the community is informed of rabbit baiting programs is so that pet owners can act to ensure that risk is minimised. For dogs, this often means simply adhering to existing reserve regulations such as keeping dogs on leads.
- Methods of informing the community include: Council's website, twitter, media release, site signage, letter drops to landholders.

Baiting techniques used to minimise impacts on off-target animal species

- Use of exclusion cages: The poison bait is placed within a wire mesh exclusion cage. This excludes wallabies and many bird species (refer to image below).
- Use of treated Oats: The current baiting program uses oats with the Pindone poison applied to the husk of the grain. Some characteristics of the poison oat product greatly reduce the chances of birds consuming the poison. These include:
 - The poison oats are dyed green to reduce uptake by birds. Birds have colour vision and normally seek out red and yellow 'ripe' coloured food. Rabbits are thought to be colour blind.
 - The poison is applied to the husk of the grain which is typically removed by bird species prior to them eating the kernel (e.g. when you see all of the seed husks at the bottom of a bird cage).
 - Even if birds were to consume the husks they would normally require multiple exposures over several days in order to consume enough poison to be fatal. However many birds fly away and not eat from the same location each day.
 - It is also uncommon that most bird species will go underneath the wallaby exclusion cage to feed.
- Minimising the impact on dogs: Pindone bait has been developed to achieve good levels of rabbit control while posing minimal risks to other animals, including dogs. For example:
 - Any small exposure of dogs to low doses of Pindone is also cleared quickly from the dog and usually results in no detectable effect.
 - It has been calculated that a dog would need to eat about 13 rabbits that had each just eaten the maximum dose of bait for the dog to get an acute lethal exposure.
 - Rabbits affected by Pindone normally return to their burrow or harbour to die. Most dead rabbits are therefore relatively inaccessible to dogs. However contractors involved in the Council program undertake regular site inspection and remove any visible rabbit carcasses.

- Although there have been no confirmed cases of dog death due to eating a Pindone poisoned rabbits, the administration of Vitamin K1 to any dog suspected of being poisoned or showing signs of poisoning will completely reverse the effects of Pindone and the dog will fully recover. Vitamin K1 can be administered by a veterinarian.

In order to minimise the risk of poisoning to off-target animal species, Council officers and contractors monitor baiting sites throughout the rabbit control program (including at night) and will take further action if it is deemed that native wildlife or domestic animals are under threat.



Left: Rabbit baiting exclusion cage, designed to exclude non-target animal species.

Above: Baiting with in an exclusion cage (photo courtesy Phillip Island Nature Parks).

Rabbit monitoring program

Council undertakes an ongoing monitoring of the Coast and Bushland Rabbit Control Program. This includes night time spotlight rabbit counting surveys at baiting locations. These surveys have been undertaken continuously since 2010, so there is now extensive data on rabbit numbers. This data is used when planning annual rabbit baiting efforts. It also provides information on areas frequented by non-target wildlife such as wallabies.

Stakeholders

Council, users of foreshore and bushland reserves, pet owners, volunteer groups, the broader community.

Finances

Council currently contributes \$12,000 from the operational budget to support the Coast and Bushland Rabbit Control Program.

Next Steps

Continue to implement and monitor the Coast and Bushland Rabbit Control Program.