



RABBITS 4 March 2009

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders) (17:05): The Rann government has taken its eye off the rabbits. In fact, it has been so busy chasing headlines with its environmental projects such as unviable and ineffective wind turbines on government buildings since its term in office that an animal as simple as the rabbit will undermine any environmental credentials the government has ever aspired to. Rabbits continue to destroy our crops and native flora, and are also providing food that is assisting feral cats and foxes to thrive, which are destroying our native fauna.

Project research scientist for arid lands, Katherine Moseby, recently said on ABC Radio that: We have about one cat per square kilometre up here and every release we've done outside our reserve, we've had animals eaten by feral cats. So unless something's done to halt the feral cat and fox problem, we haven't got a hope of getting threatened species back into the landscape on a large scale.

Land confiscated by the government without compensation during coastal freeholding of leasehold land, combined with the land currently being taken under coastal protection and native vegetation legislation, is adding significantly to the government's existing parks and reserves.

This government firmly puts the cost of controlling rabbits on private landholders and takes little to no responsibility for rabbit control that is already a major problem on the huge tracts of land under their ownership and control. Fears of a rabbit plague have again been highlighted recently in *The Advertiser* by Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia Chairman Tim Rogers. Experts warn that the rabbits are breeding up because of a reduction in control measures, the declining virulence of the calicivirus and the banning of traps and culling. Mr Rogers stated:

We've perhaps got a catastrophe coming and we fear we won't get any help until it hits.

An article in the *Eyre Peninsula Tribune* in March highlighted the increasing number of rabbit baits being used by landholders this year to control the masses of pests wreaking havoc on their land. Laying baits, although effective, will barely put a dent in Australia's rabbit population when they repopulate so very quickly. Mr Rann loves to tout his supposed green credentials by spending taxpayers' money on projects such as solar panels on the roofs of schools, the airport and showgrounds. While it is all very nice to use solar energy, the reality is that these infrastructure already have power readily available. Our money is being wasted on gimmicks when there are far more urgent environmental needs.

If he really wanted to show how environmentally aware and advanced he is, the Premier should at least be spending equivalent amounts towards eradicating rabbits. By saving native vegetation we will at least be usefully contributing towards controlling greenhouse gas emissions, not to mention preventing the devastating effect on fragile coastal landscapes as out-of-control rabbits devour anything and everything green. It is the state government's responsibility to provide relief to the extreme situation, especially since it is the custodians of our precious coastal and national parks. The state government should be contributing more towards farmers and farming-friendly organisations to enable them to manage effective pest-control programs, and scientists must be given sufficient funds to research a new biological control agent.

Last year the Tasmanian government allocated \$12.6 million over four years to the eradication of rabbits and rodents. We do not have to reinvent the wheel, there should be opportunities to work in partnership with other states for a final solution for rabbit eradication throughout Australia. Rabbits cost this country millions of dollars each year through reduced primary production and environmental damage. We have lost several species of native animals and native vegetation due to rabbits, foxes and wild cats. They devour our flora and fauna, killing outright and depriving our native animals of their food.

Rabbits demolish seedlings, preventing the new growth of native trees and shrubs. With the threat of global warming we need more not fewer plants to help absorb the rising CO₂ in the atmosphere before it gets to dangerous levels, reducing the heating of the earth's surface, and the soil and water erosion. I envisage that we can and should create microclimates across Australia that could help significantly to ameliorate the effects of climate change, but to do this rabbits must go. Rabbit numbers are creeping up once again, and they continue to be a significant threat to our land. Last year there was a notable increase in numbers on Eyre Peninsula and Yorke Peninsula.

One farmer advised that when he recently went out with a spotlight he saw about 600 in just one location. The myxomatosis virus introduced in 1950 was generally a success. However, by 1958 the disease had changed and rabbits had become somewhat immune. The virulent Lausanne strain of the myxoma virus was then imported to Australia, and later two rabbit fleas were introduced to assist with the spread of myxomatosis. While this helped to keep rabbit numbers lower for a while it soon became apparent that a stronger control measure was needed. The calicivirus (or rabbit haemorrhaging disease RHD) introduced in 1996 was very successful, particularly in lower rainfall areas, eradicating about 95 per cent of the rabbit population, but was not as successful in the higher rainfall areas of the region.

Benefits were immediate, including revegetation of native flora, more feed for native fauna and livestock and healthier soil. Unfortunately, it is no longer having the same effect on rabbit numbers as it did when it was first introduced, and rabbits have built up low levels of resistance to the RHD as well as myxomatosis. While this was expected, it was hoped that it would not happen so soon. Myxomatosis still controls 40 to 60 per cent of the population and RHD has managed to wipe out 95 per cent, but these biological control methods are not enough alone to wipe out the entire rabbit population.

Rabbits' natural predators—foxes, cats and eagles—help to control the

population but feral foxes and cats themselves are a problem. They destroy native fauna, as well as some livestock, and also require control. It takes only a year for rabbits to re-establish their populations. Accordingly, before we know it, we could be back to the days before myxomatosis and calicivirus. A new biological control agent is urgently needed to wipe out the rabbit population once and for all, and it needs to be the final solution. We need to ensure that rabbits will not have a chance to build up a resistance to a new control mechanism and this destructive introduced species is finally totally wiped out.

The Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia has placed a high importance on the need for biological agents for rabbit control. It is the most cost effective form of rabbit control. It has a relatively low cost to introduce, with long term economic and environmental benefits. Other control methods, such as laying baits and ripping warrens are time consuming for landholders and the cost usually comes out of their own pocket. Even with the use and success of biological control methods, the Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia advises land managers that they should continue to use conventional control methods, such as baits and ripping warrens as well, especially when rabbit numbers are low, to get the best result from the combined use of all control agents.

It is important not to be complacent at a time when the population is still relatively low. This state government needs to take the initiative and allocate funds for research and introduction of a new biological control. There is a need to provide more financial assistance to landholders for pest control, perhaps by offering rebates on baits, traps and warren-ripping machinery. The government must also control the rabbits on its own land.

At the 2008 Eyre Peninsula field days in Cleve, the Eyre Peninsula Natural Resources Management Board launched a free informative DVD and booklet instructing landowners how to control rabbits effectively. The DVD (funded by the former Liberal government Australian Natural Heritage Trust program) provides information on all facets of rabbit control. Peter Sheridan, who led the project, has more than 30 years' experience in rabbit control. He has assisted many landholders over the years in successfully eradicating rabbits and now his plan is accessible to all by way of this DVD and booklet. Mr Sheridan stated:

We worked out that the average Eyre Peninsula farm is losing about \$4,000 a year in cropping and grazing production because of the damage caused by feral rabbits.

He went on to explain that planning is essential in rabbit control. This resourceful way of distributing crucial pest control information to assist landholders is a proactive approach to rabbit control and I commend the EPNRM for its initiative to instigate such a plan. It is important that landholders and government work together in controlling rabbits.

I have been a member of the Foundation for a Rabbit Free Australia for many years and suggest that others join this proactive organisation to support the eradication of rabbits from our nation. It is vital that this problem is controlled. We need to act fast and wipe out what is left of the rabbit population before Australia, once again, is in the grip of another plague. Just yesterday the *Port Lincoln Times* reported:

Hot weather has made a dent in rabbit populations in some areas according to Eyre Peninsula Natural Resources Management Board biosecurity program manager Iggy Honan.

Mr Honan said in Streaky Baby, Coffin Bay and Port Neill the coastal rabbits were still 'quite bad'. 'We're not completely sure why but obviously think the different weather conditions are interfering with the spread of calicivirus.'

Rest of speech that time did not allow: In the past days we have had some rain across South Australia which will provide fresh grass and we can expect rabbit numbers to explode. Something must be done to eliminate rabbits now.

The Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre (IACRC), a federally funded body, today advised that rabbits cost Australia's agriculture sector approximately \$200 million per year. A rabbit tracking website has been launched in Canberra and IACRC chief Tony Peacock said the use of a new calicivirus strain will be one of the ways to reduce the pest's impact. This is being supported by cricket legend Glenn McGrath.

RABBITS 23 November 1995

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): It is interesting to follow a member who continually knocks the State—knock, knock, knock. The premature release of the rabbit calicivirus has focused public attention on rabbits and their management. Most of the emphasis has been on the risks and potentially adverse consequences of this release, not on the benefits of rabbit control. The rabbit is Australia's most damaging pest animal. The soon to be released review of the Animal and Plant Control Act points to an estimated annual \$62 million benefit from controlling rabbits just in South Australia. A recent report into the savings for the Commonwealth from eradication of the rabbit amount to a staggering \$600 million benefit per year. In this State the South Australian Farmers' Federation estimates that the State's farmers spend \$1.5 million per year on rabbit control. At least two thirds of this amount comes straight out of farmers' pockets.

Rabbits were introduced into Australia last century. Records of the Eyre Peninsula show that the man who brought rabbits into Middlecamp near Cowell on Franklin Harbor threatened instant dismissal to any employee found killing a rabbit. A book titled Franklin Harbor District Council 1888-1988 states:

The rabbits flourished in their new environment and multiplied at such a devastating rate that they were well established in all parts of the district by the time the area was surveyed for agriculture in 1878.

Poisoning, trapping and ripping of burrows have little effect on the rabbit population. In limestone country on the West Coast of Eyre Peninsula professional trappers could easily net up to 3 000 rabbits per night without visibly reducing the numbers.

Today it is difficult to envisage the millions of rabbits that abounded in the countryside. Rabbits were responsible for not denuding areas of all growing plants. Sheoaks were particularly susceptible. Captain Matthew Flinders noted on his exploration in 1802 that the hills near Port Lincoln and Tumbly Bay, visible from the sea, were clothed in sheoaks. One of these properties was the White River Station at Louth Bay. The late

Clarrie Proude said that the White River Station homestead block was on the market for two years before he and his father bought it for £4 an acre (\$12 per hectare) earlier this century.

They were told that they would go broke and that they would never pay for the block because it was so badly infested with rabbits that income from the property was very low. The sheoaks had all gone from the hills which were bare because rabbits ate all regeneration as it appeared. Sheoaks were also plentiful on the western side of Eyre Peninsula but few remained by the 1950s. In 1990, Bill and Maureen Nosworthy of Elliston won the Ibis Award for landcare for sheoak regeneration and revegetation on their property at Lake Hamilton. Even then, fencing to exclude rabbits, along with other means of rabbit control, was an essential part of the project.

The regeneration project was only possible when it was begun in the 1980s because of the drop in rabbit numbers, brought about principally by myxomatosis but aided by conventional methods of rabbit destruction. In the 1950s, new hope emerged with the release of the myxomatosis virus, which was spread by mosquito. Rabbit populations dropped dramatically. Land that had been unable to be used for agriculture was reclaimed and productivity blossomed. The distinctive rabbit edge to crops disappeared and crops grew to the limit of the worked ground.

However, over the years the effectiveness of myxomatosis has declined. Now we have a new weapon in the rabbit calicivirus. Fears that native fauna would be targeted by predators if the rabbit was removed as a food source would seem unfounded going on past experience. The initial effects of myxomatosis was as dramatic as that of calicivirus. The drop in the rabbit population at that time was an inestimable boon not only to native fauna through the lessening of competition for available food resources but also to native flora and agriculture. I believe that the Federal and State Departments of Primary Industries are looking at the loss of livelihood by rabbit shooters and processors. Shooters were the first to suggest that they be assisted to shoot foxes whose skins, at present, are unsaleable, which would help to prevent possible targeting of native animals by foxes.

However, I suggest that courses in tractor driving and machinery operation for rabbit ripping be also considered. Perhaps this could form the basis of a Commonwealth job scheme for the long-term unemployed to help farmers. Now is the opportunity to eradicate the rabbits before they build a tolerance to the calicivirus as they did to myxomatosis and their numbers rise once more. The Rotary Club of Australia already has a plan in place to do this. It is called ACRE (Australian Campaign for Rabbit Eradication) and it should be supported. Consideration should be given to gaining tax deductions for this important work by farmers and others.