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| Rabbit Management | Document No: | SCS - 029 |
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| Responsible Officer: | | Environment Coordinator |
| Authorising Officer: | | Chief Executive Officer |

1. Purpose

To outline Council's commitment and approach to best practice rabbit management in Surf Coast Shire, in partnership with the community and land management agencies.

2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- a) rabbit management works undertaken by Council or at Council's direction on Council owned and managed land, including rural roadsides, recreation reserves and nature reserves; and
- b) how Council interacts with the community to achieve best practice rabbit management across the Surf Coast Shire.

3. Application

This policy applies to Council, its employees and all contracted service providers.

4. Rationale

Council has committed in the Council Plan 2013 – 2017 to improve pest plant and animal management as a priority and has allocated significant additional budget to support this commitment. Council is responding to environmental opportunities with its Towards Environmental Leadership program, which focuses on sustainability themes including land use and wildlife.

Rabbits cause considerable damage to the natural environment and agriculture by competing with livestock for pasture, grazing of crops and native vegetation and causing soil erosion. Rabbits are well adapted to climatic conditions in much of Australia and occur in all states and territories. Rabbits, along with foxes and cats at large, are considered to be Australia's most serious vertebrate pests and severely affect native flora and fauna, vegetation communities, landforms, geomorphic processes and sensitive sites, as well as primary industries. This situation continues despite the availability and application of chemical and physical control methods, and the release of the biological control agents myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease. Competition and land degradation by feral rabbits are listed as a key threatening process under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and pose a threat to a large number of native species.

The European rabbit is declared under the Victorian *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* (CaLP Act) as an 'established pest animal', which means that it is already established in the wild in Victoria and is unlikely to be eradicated. Under the CaLP Act, all land owners (including council) have a legal duty to prevent the spread of, and as far as possible eradicate, established pest animals. Coordination of rabbit management activities across the landscape between the community and other land managers is absolutely critical for effective, long term rabbit control. Council also has additional legal responsibilities under the CaLP Act regarding pest plant and animal management on municipal rural roadsides.

From time to time, the release of a new biological control measure (like the K5 strain of the calici virus) provides the opportunity to increase land holder and land manager return on investment in rabbit management, especially through a coordinated, best practice approach.

This policy has been developed directly from the results of two rabbit management workshops hosted by Council (24 May and 1 August 2016) with representatives from local Landcare groups, community groups,

the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources and the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (see Workshop Reports - Attachments 1 & 2.) The policy also reflects legal advice received by Council regarding the use of poison baits on Council owned and managed land.

5. Definitions

- Baiting – laying of poisoned oats or carrots
- Best practice rabbit management – the use of a variety of recognised techniques, in a coordinated manner, and implemented at the landscape scale which reflect humane treatment and limit impact on non-target species
- Fumigation – introduction of toxic fumes into a warren where it is inhaled by rabbits
- Implosion – targeted use of explosives to destroy/collapse rabbit warrens in areas inaccessible to or inappropriate for ripping
- Pindone – an anticoagulant causing fatal haemorrhages. Antidote is Vitamin K1
- Rabbit – refers to feral or wild populations of European rabbits (*Orytolagus cuniculus*), a declared 'established pest animal' under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*.
- Rabbit harbour – shelter above-ground, usually prickly woody species, rock piles or logs
- Ripping – destruction of warrens using machinery
- Warren – a collection of burrows
- 1080 – Fast acting poison compound Sodium fluoroacetate.

6. Council Purpose and Direction

This Policy is consistent with Council's purpose to 'help our community and environment to thrive' and helps deliver on one of Council's organisational directions 'to be an innovative and flexible leader and a constructive partner'. Strategic partnerships with the community, community groups, land management agencies and land holders are integral to the successful delivery of this Policy.

7. Policy

Council's policy is to:

- meet its legal obligations regarding rabbit management;
- use best practice rabbit management on Council owned and managed land;
- help our community to achieve best practice rabbit management on land that is not Council owned or managed; and
- develop and maintain partnerships with the community and land management agencies.

Council also supports the development of a community led rabbit management plan for the Shire which reflects the following community vision and community aspirational goal, developed at two rabbit management workshops hosted by Council with representatives from local Landcare and community groups, relevant state government departments and the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority:

- Community Vision
The Surf Coast Shire community leads the way in integrated best practice rabbit management.
- Community Aspirational Goal
To reduce rabbits to less than one active burrow per hectare at a timeline that can be defended by the land manager.

8. Guiding Principles

The following principles, which have been developed with input from the two community rabbit management workshops, are adopted by Council in the management of rabbits in Surf Coast Shire:

- Community led – recognise the inherent strength of the community. The primary role of local government is to assist people to achieve their goals, while recognising this must not be at the expense of the broader community. Sometimes this involves Council leading, other times standing alongside or removing unnecessary barriers;
- Long-term commitment and continuous improvement – successful rabbit management requires an ongoing commitment and regular monitoring and evaluation of program effectiveness;

- Strategic partnerships – coordination of control works with the community, community groups, land management agencies and land holders is essential to effective ‘no boundaries’ rabbit management;
- Best practice management with a focus on harm minimisation – use a variety of recognised techniques, in a coordinated manner, implemented at the landscape scale which reflect humane treatment & limit impact on non-target species;
- Efficient, effective, results oriented asset protection – target efforts where the best results can be achieved and defended to protect key environmental, economic and social assets.

9. Management Approach

The most efficient and effective way to control pest animals, including rabbits, is by using a variety of techniques, in a coordinated fashion in partnership with the community and land management agencies, and implemented at the landscape scale. To the extent possible, Council will deliver its rabbit management activities in accordance with all the guiding principles listed above.

To achieve the most effective results, Council will, subject to site specific constraints, a site risk assessment and the baiting requirements noted below, deliver its rabbit management with reference to Agriculture Victoria’s recommended approach:

- Allow biological control and natural mortality to reduce the rabbit population;
- Bait to reduce numbers prior to ripping;
- Remove surface harbour (above ground shelter) and destroy warrens;
- Follow up with fumigation and further warren destruction; and
- Be persistent, remain vigilant and monitor regularly.

Control Techniques

Baiting

There are two approved poisons for baiting rabbits – Pindone and 1080. If conducting baiting on Council owned or managed land, Council will generally use Pindone because an antidote, Vitamin K, is available. The poison 1080 will generally not be used on Council owned or managed land that is open to the public, as no antidote is available.

Baiting will only be used on Council owned and managed land in accordance with verbatim legal advice received by Council from Russell Kennedy lawyers in April 2016, namely:

- Council is legally able to use poison baits for the control and eradication of pest animals on land owned and/or managed by Council, where it is considered to be an appropriate pest control measure in the circumstances;
- A uniform approach of widespread poison baiting across the municipality should not be adopted. Any baiting undertaken should be location specific and conducted only after a risk assessment for the location has been undertaken by a qualified expert or contractor to determine whether or not poison baiting is suitable at the particular location;
- Any use of poison baits must be in accordance with the product label, any standard operating procedures and in accordance with best practice methods;
- All reasonable precautions to prevent the bait being ingested by non-target species must be taken; and
- Baiting should always be undertaken by a suitably qualified and experienced pest control operator.

Above-Ground/Surface Harbour Removal

Removal of above-ground harbour destroys surface shelter for rabbits, facilitates and increases the effectiveness of warren removal and deters recolonization of warrens. Harbour used by rabbits may, however, also be important habitat for native wildlife and/or significant native vegetation.

In assessing harbour removal, Council will consider the benefits for rabbit management against the risk to native wildlife and vegetation, especially in conservation areas. Where removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation is required for harbour removal, Council will consult with relevant adjoining land holders and remove the vegetation in accordance with the exemption for pest animal burrows under the Surf Coast Shire planning scheme. This approach minimises the amount of native vegetation removed and avoids the

need for a planning permit, the development of a native vegetation offset management plan and purchase of offsets by Council. Where appropriate, Council may, in consultation with the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning, apply for a planning permit to remove native vegetation beyond the scope of the exemption for pest animal burrows.

Warren Removal

Warren removal is integral to successful rabbit management and is achieved by ripping or use of explosives (implosion).

Council will conduct warren removal using equipment appropriate to the local conditions. Implosion or excavation may be used to destroy warrens in areas that are inaccessible to ripping or where ripping is undesirable due to risk of soil erosion, cultural heritage issues and/or sensitive native vegetation.

Fumigation

Fumigation is best used as a follow up technique to poisoning and warren ripping, but may also be effective where ripping cannot be done, in situations where poisons cannot be used and when treating small areas or isolated rabbit populations.

Council will use fumigation on sites where the site risk assessment indicates baiting is inappropriate, the site constraints preclude ripping or implosion, the rabbit population is isolated or low in number and/or the site is small in area. Fumigation will only be undertaken on Council owned and managed land by suitably qualified and experienced pest control operators.

Other Management Options

In addition to the rabbit management options of biological control, Pindone baiting, warren and surface harbour removal and fumigation, Council may also consider, where appropriate, the following management control options on Council owned or managed land:

- Exclusion fencing
- Shooting
- Ferreting

10. Rabbit Hotspots

Council will help develop and maintain a prioritised list of rabbit 'hotspots' in the Shire, in partnership with the community, Landcare groups and land management agencies. The list will be developed using agreed criteria.

For rabbit hotspots located on Council owned or managed land, hotspots will be assessed according to the agreed criteria and prioritised. A site management plan will be developed for each prioritised site by Council officers in partnership with relevant community groups and land management agencies. Independent expert advice will be obtained where appropriate for the site. Development of site management plans will be staged according to available resources.

The plans will be reviewed annually in partnership with relevant community groups and land management agencies until rabbit numbers reach acceptable levels. Independent assessment of the effectiveness of particular plans may be sought where appropriate.

11. Policy Review

This Policy will be trialled for a period of 12 months after adoption by Council. The implementation of the Policy will be reviewed in consultation with key stakeholders and a report provided to Council. The report will record reported deaths of non-target species that could be associated with Council's rabbit management program. Council will take steps to understand if any the deaths of any non-target species were caused by its rabbit management program.

This Policy will be reviewed in three years or earlier if warranted by changes in best practice rabbit management.

12. Records

Records shall be retained for at least the period shown below.

| Record | Retention/Disposal Responsibility | Retention Period | Location |
|--------|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Policy | PROS 0701 13.1.1 | Permanent | Electronic |

13. Attachments

- Workshop Report – Surf Coast Shire Council Rabbit Management Policy Workshop 24 May 2016
- Workshop Report – Surf Coast Shire Council Rabbit Management Policy & Hotspots Workshop 1 August 2016

14. References

- PestSmart Standard Operating Procedures (www.pestsmart.org.au)
- *RAB004: Ground baiting of rabbits with pindone;*
- *RAB005: Diffusion fumigation of rabbit warrens*
- *RAB006: Rabbit warren destruction by ripping*
- *RAB007: Rabbit warren destruction using explosives*
- *Biology, ecology and management of vertebrate pests in NSW*, NSW Government: Department of Primary Industries 2013
- Threat Abatement Plan for competition and land degradation by rabbits (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage & the Arts 2008)
- Background document for the threat abatement plan for competition and land degradation by rabbits (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage & the Arts 2008)

Surf Coast Shire Council documents

- Surf Coast Shire Council Plan 2013 - 2017
- Pest Plant & Animal Strategy 2016 (*under development*)

External Documents

- www.agriculture.vic.gov.au
- Victorian Rabbit Management Collaboration Initiative (2014), Invasive Animals CRC

Attachments

- Workshop Report – Surf Coast Shire Council Rabbit Management Policy Workshop 24 May 2016
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