SSAA National
Submission Paper

Senate Inquiry into the impact of feral deer, pigs and goats in Australia

November 2018

SSAA National Statement

The Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (SSAA National) accepts the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the impact of feral deer, pigs and goats in Australia.

SSAA National has in excess of 190,000 members Australia wide who care deeply for the environment. Many of them spend time in the outdoors undertaking their recreational pursuits as well as participating in voluntary conservation and/or asset protection activities. These activities involve the control of a variety of pest species across both public and private land.

SSAA National and its state branches have been involved in many pest management projects. For 20 years, our Conservation and Wildlife Management (CWM) groups have been a key stakeholder in pest management across a variety of landscapes throughout our great country. Our longest ongoing commitment to active pest management in national parks has been through Operation Bounceback in South Australia's Flinders Ranges. This includes the Flinders Feral Predator Program.

Through this program, we have assisted in the recovery of yellow-footed rock-wallaby populations and, in 2016, with the reintroduction of western quolls. Feral cats are one of the main predators of the western quoll and pose a serious risk to their reintroduction and re-establishment. We assembled a special team to target feral cats to protect this project and SSAA National committed $60,000 to the Foundation for Australia's Most Endangered Species (FAME) to further assist its quoll reintroduction program. We also committed a substantial amount of funding to assist in the research and development of a new feral cat trap technology, which is currently being tested at the western quoll reintroduction release site and other locations across the country.

More recently, the National Parks and Wildlife Service's (NPWS) trial Supplementary Pest Control (SPC) Program in New South Wales has proved itself to be a potential useful component of the NPWS's integrated pest management approach. This type of pest control model has been recognised as an acceptable tool to remove pest animals from NSW national parks. Now that the trial has been completed, we look forward to the start of an on-going program where our environmental volunteers can assist with conservation and pest control operations.

Our SSAA Farmer Assist program is available across the country. This program allows landholders to use an online portal to find accredited volunteers with professional-like skills to assist with pest management as part of asset protection activities. The free pest control program can be used to find volunteers willing to undertake the control of wild deer, feral pigs and goats, and other problem wildlife. The program is designed to work in collaboration with other pest management tools; as such, it can be considered as one of the potential options of pest control created by the community for the community's benefit.

SSAA National and its state branches are happy to work with other stakeholders in the pest management space and we believe we have a large resource that can be motivated to participate in a coordinated way across a range of scales and land tenures. We also believe the use of volunteer hunters and shooters is an underutilised resource and that these groups can certainly make a greater contribution to pest animal management in this country.

SSAA National and its state branches are also committed to the continual improvement of all our pest management programs to ensure that we provide programs that are best practice, safe, target specific, humane and meet community expectations.

We anticipate that there will be number of organisations that will make submissions to this inquiry that will attempt to downplay the role that volunteer hunters/shooters can play in the management of wild deer, feral pigs and feral goats. Sadly, judgments/assumptions will be made without considering (or even ignoring) the different 'motivations' that hunters have. Hunters hunt for a variety of reasons. For example, a 'meat hunter' may only take one animal to fill the freezer every now and again whereas hunters with a pest management focus would seek to cull as many as they can as often as they can. This is an important factor because hunters that have pest control motivations can be empowered to provide a capacity of on-ground control that no departmental budget will ever consider.

To illustrate this point, our most recent membership survey indicated that approximately 80 per cent of our membership identify themselves as hunters. Of that 80 per cent, approximately 75 per cent hunt for pest control. In people terms, there are approximately 120,000 hunters within our organisation (not the entire licenced firearm community) who could be empowered to volunteer to undertake more ground shooting pest control.

We as an organisation are happy to sit down with any government department or agency and work towards utilising this capacity in the best possible way. We have 'runs' on the board that demonstrate our ability to assist both public and private land managers in achieving positive outcomes for our environment in regards to the control of wild deer, feral pigs and feral goats.

Issues

The impact of feral deer, pigs and goats in Australia, and national priorities to prevent the problems worsening for the natural environment, community and farmers, including:

(a) The current and potential occurrence of feral deer, pigs and goats across Australia;

We acknowledge that all species of concern to this inquiry can be found across the country in a variety of environments and in varying abundances. Other submissions will most probably provide greater clarity to the extent of current distributions and their abundances.

Increasing distributions and abundances of certain species have been the result of poor management in the past by a variety of land managers throughout a long period of time. Examples leading to this situation include allowing new populations to establish from farm releases and limited control activities in 'locked up' parcels of public land that then act as breeding areas for pest animals.

Efforts to curb the future dispersal of pest animals should be prioritised to focus on areas that would be most sensitive to any expansion in abundance of pest animals. Such areas could be high-value conservation areas where there may be communities of threatened species. In other less-sensitive areas with established populations, containment and asset protection should be a primary objective to minimise the impact on the natural environment, community and farmers.

(b) The likely and potential biosecurity risks and impacts of feral deer, pigs and goats on the environment, agriculture, community safety and other values;

All three species are similar to other native and non-native species in terms of potential negative environmental, economic and social impacts if they become overabundant.

Overabundance of any species can have detrimental impacts to the environment such as over grazing, soil erosion and water contamination, as well as economic impacts on agriculture and forestry.

In regards to biosecurity risk, most mammalian species, including livestock and native animals, have the potential to be hosts that carry and spread a number of exotic diseases that are currently not present in Australia. The most sensible solution and cost-effective way to deal with such risk is to prevent the arrival of these exotic diseases into the country at our borders. Prevention, in the case of biosecurity risk, will certainly be very much cheaper than a cure and this should remain the focal point in regards to biosecurity risk mitigation. Any potential outbreak should be treated with extensive and effective local containment operations.

(c) The effectiveness of current state and national laws, policies and practices in limiting spread and mitigating impacts of feral deer, pigs and goats;

There has recently been much time and energy spent (wasted) on debating the classification of certain species, in particular wild deer. Some organisations declare that by classifying wild deer as a 'game' species that it is afforded protections that are detrimental to managing them as a pest if they become overabundant. The true and simplest definition of the 'game' classification is a species under management. This term can be used for both native or non-native species (for example, wild duck are a game species in a number of states).

Management is determined by goals and, in many cases, this is to ensure a sustainable harvest takes place. If species become overabundant there are mechanisms through changes in regulations (bag limits, seasons, etc) that can be used to increase take/harvest. Wild deer are viewed differently by various parts of the community but the classification in some states as a game species has caused an unnecessary sideshow to the real issue of managing the impacts of overabundance when and where it occurs.

Organisations with an anti-hunting bias generally push for a change in declaration in an attempt to devalue deer in the eyes of the hunting community. If such organisations would sit down with hunting organisations and work towards a common goal in regards to managing overabundant wild deer, the overall outcome would be much different.

Whether or not wild deer are treated as game or a 'resource' should not have a significant impact on the ability to control overabundant populations. Regulatory conditions surrounding take/harvest can be manipulated to achieve a desired outcome such as a greater take to reduce abundance. With proper consultation, acknowledgement and access to more land, the hunting community can mobilise to do their bit to limit the spread and manage the impacts of all three species of interest to this inquiry.

The common goal for all laws, policies and practices should be to improve the flexibility to deal with overabundant populations rather than focusing on issues that have the potential to divide sections of the community.

(d) The efficacy and welfare implications of currently available control and containment tools and methods, and the potential for new control and containment tools and methods;

Standard operating procedures exist that cover a variety of control options for all three species of interest to the inquiry. All these options have varying levels of humaneness in

regards to animal welfare and efficiency. There is concern within the general community regarding the application and humaneness of certain poison baits, especially toxins such as 1080. The SSAA is pragmatic and does accept the fact that until more humane poisons are developed and become freely available, land managers are limited in what they can use to achieve current control objectives. The potential use of current poisons on large herbivores does raise significant welfare concerns and would most probably struggle to receive wide community support.

Where possible, more humane options such as ground shooting should be considered and where a more cost-effective solution is required, volunteer pest control should be an option.

(e) Priority research questions;

Research should be focused on determining the full extent of the distribution of all three species as well as their current relative abundances. This will assist land managers to target priority areas where overabundant species may be causing larger negative environmental, economic and social impacts.

Research should be undertaken to illustrate the relationships between density and actual damage caused by all species. This will enable all stakeholders to have a true understanding of the effect of the three species across different density levels. This may drive management to focus better on impact mitigation where eradication is not possible. This research should also highlight other species (both native or non-native) of high abundance in these areas to ensure that the 'right' species causing negative impacts are identified.

Research on how the three species will react to climate change needs to be a priority. In Victoria, for example, it appears that the increasing wild deer population may have a correlation to the large wildfires that have been experienced during the past 20 years. A question to be answered could be whether more frequent fire events change vegetation communities and whether this can also cause an increase or decrease in wild deer populations and densities.

Research needs to be credible and accurate. For example, there have been distribution maps created and promoted by certain organisations that show that wild deer will 'invade' most of the country. The reality is that wild deer will not find suitable habitat in much of those areas indicated, especially in relation to having adequate water resources.

(f) The benefits of developing and fully implementing national threat abatement plans for feral deer, pigs and goats;

Plans are only beneficial if resources are available to undertake the nominated actions within them. Plans may help with developing management objectives, but it would be difficult to meet objectives without a high level of national, state and local coordination as well as proper resourcing.

(g) Any other related matters;

There are a number of impediments to ground shooting activities that affect volunteer pest control efficiency that should be removed.

Volunteer pest controllers who have been assessed and approved by state police to use firearms safely should not be prevented from using the right tools. Self-loading firearms

increase culling success rates. The current restrictions on the availability of self-loading rifles and shotguns have a major impact on the chances of removing multiple pest animals at each engagement. The ability to fire a quick subsequent shot has both positive animal welfare and culling success outcomes. 'Professional' shooters do have greater access to such equipment and the SSAA would support increased access to those that have passed all the checks and balances to obtain similar equipment for volunteer pest control.

The availability and use of suppressors for pest control is another tool that can improve culling efficiency as well as animal welfare outcomes. Restricting volunteer pest controllers' access to such devices is nonsensical and such restrictions should certainly be removed. Again, professional shooters have access to such devices and the SSAA certainly supports increased access to those who have passed all the checks and balances.

Restricted access to public land to undertake volunteer pest control is another impediment. In Victoria, for example, the areas where wild deer populations have built up are generally not open to hunting. These areas include water catchments, sections of national parks and peri-urban areas.

The SSAA has been conducting effective culling programs on public land in certain states since the mid-1990s. Some state agencies seem to oppose or disregard the assistance that our environmental volunteers are happy to provide in terms of pest control. In areas that have low public visitation but hold pest animal populations, a more general approach to allowing volunteer pest controllers should exist.

Victoria and New South Wales provide a number of examples of such areas where ground shooting on public land (mainly state forests) can be safely managed to provide an additional pest control tool in the toolbox for dealing with the species of this inquiry.

Your sincerely

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