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Rabbit control in urban and semi-urban areas

DPIRD-168

This factsheet provides information on control options for rabbits in urban and semi-urban areas in Western Australia (WA).



Image 1: Rabbit in cage

Background

Rabbits cause considerable losses to agricultural and horticultural industries. They can cause serious environmental problems, such as soil erosion and degradation of native vegetation. Rabbits also compete with native fauna for food and habitat.

Rabbits may be a problem or a nuisance in urban environments where they can damage lawns and gardens, buildings, garages, and sheds. Rabbits can also damage golf courses, sports grounds, and parkland reserves.

The options for control of rabbits in urban areas are more limited than in rural areas. Complicating factors in urban areas include public health concerns and the presence and proximity of neighbours, domestic pets, or livestock.

Status and management

In WA, rabbits are declared pests under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007* for the whole of the State. To view the rabbit's pest declaration search for *Oryctolagus cuniculus* (feral) on the Western Australian Organism List (WAOL), available on the department website at dpird.wa.gov.au.

Control options

All control activities must comply with requirements under the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* and Animal Welfare (General) Regulations 2003 so that animals are handled and killed humanely. It is an offence to release any declared pest back into the wild.

- Eliminate the rabbits (trap, poison, fumigate).
- Prevent rabbits from entering the area (fencing).
- Limit the amount of damage (harbourage modification, tree guards).

Trapping

Live-capture cage traps may be used to catch rabbits when there are relatively few, and they are restricted to a relatively small area. Diced carrot (1 cm cubes), oats, or apple are effective in attracting rabbits to traps, depending on seasonal conditions.

Captured rabbits must be killed humanely in accordance with the animal welfare legislation. Acceptable techniques include cervical fracture for young rabbits, and if permissible, shooting. Non-target animals must be released unharmed at site of capture.

Some authorities (for example, local councils) loan wire cage traps to landholders for the removal of rabbits.

The use of steel jaw traps to capture rabbits is illegal.

Poisoning

Pindone oat bait

Where circumstances allow, poisoning rabbits may be an option. The most suitable rabbit poison in urban areas is the anticoagulant, pindone. Pindone is similar in action to anticoagulant poisons used to control rats and mice (for example warfarin, bromadiolone). To be effective, pindone bait needs to be ingested by rabbits over several nights of feeding.

Because there is an effective antidote (Vitamin K1, phytomenadione), pindone can be used in more closely settled areas where 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate) poison cannot be used due to the potential risk of poisoning domestic livestock and pets. However, pindone cannot be used on properties smaller than 1000 m² (0.25 acre). The antidote for pindone is available from veterinarians as an injection or tablet.

As pindone poses potential risk to native animals such as kangaroos, birds of prey, and bandicoots, an assessment of these risks needs to be undertaken before pindone baiting can be undertaken. Pindone should not be used where these non-target species are likely to be exposed to the bait or considered to be at risk.

Ready-to-use pindone bait is available through farm supply stores. Licensed Pest Management Technicians (LPMTs) are also able to lay pindone bait on your behalf. The form of pindone in these baits is the sodium salt, which is water-soluble, degradable, and non-residual. Because of its water-soluble nature, pindone baiting should not take place if rain is expected.

Rabbits need to be encouraged to feed on the bait by free feeding with unpoisoned oats before poison baiting can commence. Free feeding should continue until the rabbits are feeding consistently — this will usually take 2 to 3 nights. Once rabbits are feeding well on the unpoisoned oats, remove all remaining grain and apply the poisoned oats.

Pindone oats should be applied as 3 applications, approximately 4 days apart over a 10-to-12-day period, in accordance with the label directions regarding their safe handling and use. This includes notifying all your neighbours that poisoning is to take place, and disposing of any poisoned rabbits found. Any carcasses found should be destroyed either by incineration or deep burial (>0.5 m).

Bait stations can be used to restrict non-target species from accessing the bait. The best method for presenting bait is to place it on plastic saucers (about 40 cm diameter) secured with a brick or something similar in the centre of the saucer. The saucers with bait are best put out at night and retrieved early the next morning, as this reduces potential non-target risks.

To further reduce the potential risk to non-target species, or if rain/heavy dew is likely, the saucers should be covered with a plastic 200 L drum cut in half lengthways with small holes cut out at each end to allow access by rabbits. Alternatively, a raised concrete slab (60x60 cm on house bricks) can be used, but this design does allow greater access to non-target animals, such as birds.

Reductions in rabbit numbers achieved with pindone in bait stations can be highly variable and rabbits may take a considerable time to become accustomed to their presence.

Fencing

One way of reducing or eliminating a rabbit problem is to keep them off your property or away from high-value plants or crops. Fencing can be a permanent cost-effective solution and may be the only viable option available in certain situations, particularly in urban and semi urban areas.

Rabbit-proof netting

Rabbit-proof netting (that is, prefabricated wire netting) has been available for many years and is an effective, long-term control option when properly installed and maintained. It can be an almost impenetrable barrier, excluding all but the most persistent and agile rabbits.

Care must be taken to repair any breaches as soon as they are noticed to ensure long-term control is maintained. Any gates or entry/exit points in the fence should also be made as rabbit-proof as practicable.

A disadvantage of this technique is the high initial capital outlay. However, these costs can soon be recouped, particularly where high-value products are protected. Costs may also be reduced if there is an existing fence on which to attach the rabbit netting.

Tree guards

Tree guards are a simple but effective method of reducing rabbit damage to individual plants. There are various types of guards suitable for temporary or semi-permanent applications. These include plastic mesh netting (for example, polyethylene or polypropylene available in rolls of various lengths), rigid plastic tubes, and cylindrical sleeves.

Most of these guards will need stakes for support. Irrespective of the material used, all tree guards should have a minimum height of 40 cm to be effective against rabbits. A maximum mesh size of 3.5x3.5 cm is recommended to prevent rabbits accessing plants through the netting.

Cheaper homemade solutions, such as old tyres, milk cartons (plasticised cardboard lasts about one year), and soft drink bottles may also be used but these may be less effective.

Harbourage removal/modification

Make your property less attractive to rabbits by removing all available rabbit harbour. For example, where practical, destroy any rabbit warrens, remove rock piles or wood heaps, and keep your garden, and its surrounds, tidy.

Table 1: Summary of options for rabbit control in urban and semi-urban areas

Option	Usage / advantages	Disadvantages
Trapping (cage-traps)	Non-toxic. Can be used in conjunction with other methods. Non-target animals can be released unharmed.	Labour intensive, time consuming and requires some skill. Only suitable for low rabbit numbers. Rabbits must be killed humanely.
Poisoning (pindone)	Bait readily available. Less potential hazard to domestic animals than 1080. Antidote (Vitamin K1) available.	Cannot be used where there is a risk to native animals. Only to be used in dry weather or in bait stations.
Rabbit netting	Very effective in the short and long-term. Stops reinfestation.	High initial cost. Requires ongoing maintenance and surveillance.
Tree guards	Simple to protect small numbers of plants. Can be temporary or permanent. Reusable.	Only protects individual plants. Can be labour intensive.
Harbourage removal/modification	Good follow-up to other control methods.	Labour intensive. Not applicable to all situations. Cannot destroy native vegetation.

Related content

Refer to the department website at dpird.wa.gov.au for more information about the following:

- European rabbit
- Rabbit control
- Western Australian Organism List (WAOL)
- *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007*
- *Animal Welfare Act 2002*

Contact us

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