Farmers to benefit from revitalised rabbit control method

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Western Australian landowners and managers impacted by rabbits are invited to take part in a new national initiative examining an improved biocontrol method against this destructive pest. Credit: Invasive Animals CRC

A new more virulent virus strain (RHDV K5) set to be released this year will help WA farmers combat Australia's increasing rabbit population.

Rabbits are the nation's most costly pest and account for significant

agricultural and environmental asset loss each year.

WA has continued to be severely impacted by rabbits, particularly across some of the state's higher rainfall areas in many parts of the Wheatbelt and the viticulture-intensive Margaret River region.

High rabbit populations in these areas are estimated to be costing farmers and property owners tens of millions of dollars each year.

Rabbit numbers have also skyrocketed to reach a population density in the hundreds of millions across the country, since the first virus strain (RHDV1) was released in 1996.

The first strain was a devastating success, recording rabbit declines of more than 90 per cent in some arid areas.

But the strain was less effective to non-effective in areas with more moist climates.

An endemic benign virus is found in the cool-wet regions and temporarily protects rabbits from RHDV1, and RHDV K5 can overcome this protection.

The new strain (K5) is a variant of RHDV1 that causes a fatal haemorrhagic disease in the European rabbit (Oryctolagus cuniculus). It is specific to the European rabbit, and once a rabbit shows symptoms, death is rapid.

National Agriculture figures show the economic savings generated by the original strain are estimated to be in excess of $350 million annually, indicating that in the 17 years since its release RHDV has generated benefits of almost $6 billion to the rural industries alone.

NSW Department of Primary Industries project leader Dr Tarnya Cox, who is overseeing the national release of the K5 virus, says the new strain was needed because rabbits had built up resistance to the first strain.

"K5 has natural biological control agents and it has proven to be successful in killing rabbits in the more moist climates in Europe and Asia," Dr Cox says.

Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) researcher Susan Campbell says a release is likely to take place in early spring 2016 or autumn 2017.

The plan is to infect and release a controlled number of rabbits and monitor the rabbit-to-rabbit spread throughout populations.

"We are keen to get property owners to take part in some pre and post-release rabbit population monitoring and sampling," she says.

"Individual landowners or managers are encouraged to work together or with existing local groups in order to take part in this initiative."

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