



TRIPLING CARRYING CAPACITY ON ROCKY OUTCROPS

A concerted campaign of rabbit harbour destruction has resulted in a tripling of carrying capacity for one Victorian livestock farming family.

Rob, Jan, Tim and Cindy Hayes operate a sheep and cattle enterprise at Ruffy, near Euroa, and have waged a sustained war against rabbits on their granitic, rocky outcrops.

When one 60ha paddock, called "The Park", proved to be beyond conventional rabbit control practices, the family took to the air using a helicopter to spray out the bracken fern on the steep, rocky hill.

"The paddock took two years to grass up but we were able to triple the carrying capacity of ewes and lambs," Rob said.

"We are now able to graze the paddock for most of the year and the native grasses have returned."

Rob is a member of Hughes Creek Catchment Collaborative, and is among landholders benefiting from Victorian Landcare funding through the harbour control project, Rabbit Buster.

The Hayes family runs 400 Hereford cows and 2500 self-replacing Merino ewes on their 2000ha property, Tarcombe.

As a young man, Rob used a pack of a dozen dogs, ferrets and fumigation to rid the property of rabbits. One man was employed up to eight months of the year trapping them.

The Hughes Creek Catchment Collaborative has attracted \$408,000 in Victorian Government funding since 2006. Of the total funding, 40 per cent is devoted to rabbit control, 20 per cent to biodiversity protection and 16 per cent to weed control.

“This area used to be a backwater covered in bracken fern, rocks and rabbits – now it is prime real estate with the price of land escalating dramatically,”

- Janet Hayes

Explosives expert, the late Maurie Gray, was also contracted to undertake warren destruction.

Rabbit numbers peaked in the 1970s and 1980s – counts would be 60 rabbits per kilometre - but the introduction of calicivirus in the 1990s reduced the population to a low threshold.

“Now we would be lucky to see two to four rabbits per kilometre,” Rob said. “Fumigating is hard, manual work and not very effective so we shift rocks and rip burrows using an excavator. Excavators can do a good job but essentially the rocks are still there and quite often the rabbits burrow under them again.”

Rabbit Buster funding is provided by the Victorian Government and allocated by the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority.

The Collaborative covers more than 450 landholders in four Landcare groups.

The Rabbit Buster program is backed by the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries compliance program, and provides grants to landholders to undertake such work as warren ripping and harbour removal using earthmoving machinery.

With many absentee and small lot landholders in the area, the challenge has been educating them on best practice rabbit control, according to co-ordinator Janet Hagen.

She said the introduction of Landcare grants to fund 50 per cent of the cost of woody weed herbicides had reduced harbour and rabbit numbers.

“We distribute a weekly e-newsletter, The Granite News, to 450 households and at least one third of the addresses are in Melbourne.”

Janet believes the next step is using drone technology to spray inaccessible terrain.

On her own property at Ruffy, Janet and husband Justus have observed the return of native wildflowers with a reduction in rabbits.

“When we first moved here in 1988 the top of the hill would be just crawling with rabbits on dusk. They had left the paddocks bare and soil exposed,” she said.

“In the first couple of years we did a lot of ripping, the occasional fumigation and got rid of the bracken fern – this has made a big difference.”