



RABBIT CONTROL ENHANCES TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

Euroa sheep producer Neil Devanny points out a large rock near his shearing shed.

“There used to be 35-40 rabbits clustered around that rock each evening,” he said.

Neil’s 283ha farm was once like Swiss cheese - potholed with thousands of rabbit burrows. Today, after a concerted 15-year effort of 500 hours of warren ripping using excavators and bulldozers, combined with ongoing vigilance and baiting, Neil’s property is almost rabbit free.

It is a far cry from when his father Bruce caught 2500 pairs of rabbits over a three week period on a 162ha portion of the farm in 1983.

Neil and his wife Bethany holistically manage 450 Merino ewes joined to White Suffolk rams on native pastures at Gooram, near Euroa.

In the steep, rocky terrain of the property, an excavator has proven far more effective than the bulldozer with its ability to reach over rocks and shift them around.

“We ripped at least 3m beyond the edges of the warrens, backfilling and track rolling so there were no rocks or cover to encourage the rabbits to come back,” Neil said.

“Ripping is the icing on the cake – it is important to firstly reduce numbers by fumigation and poisoning to lessen their capacity to return to burrows that have been ripped.

“Carrying capacity has doubled, native trees are regenerating and wild flowers have appeared, resulting in improved long term productivity and profitability.”

“Wherever possible our practice is to rip across the face of a hill.”

Neil said that although erosion does not generally occur on ripped areas, ongoing monitoring was needed to ensure burrows were not reopened.

He has collaborated with Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) staff on monitoring vegetation regrowth after the release of the viral disease, calicivirus.

Pre-release, the DEPI and Granite Creeks members set up a spotlight transect of 16km in length, with rabbit counts peaking in 1996 of over 2500 for the transect.

“At one hotspot where there was 500 rabbits, we now see 10-12 as the ripping and calicivirus has been most effective,” Neil said.

Neil and Bethany have watched the regeneration of native trees, shrubs and grasses on their own farm, and have benefited from improved access for farm machinery and follow up control work.

“The release of the disease made a huge impact - I observed the regeneration of an increased number of seedlings, grasses and wildflowers,” Neil said.

As chairperson of the Granite Creeks Project Incorporated, he works with his committee on pest plant and animal projects using an integrated approach.

Granite Creeks takes in six Landcare groups of 1400 landholders – Balmatum Sheans Creek, Creightons Creek, Gooram Valley Landcare Group, Burnt Creek, Longwood East and Strathbogie Tablelands.

Since 2006, the Granite Creeks integrated pest plant and animal control project has been funded by Victorian Government programs such as Second Generation Landcare and, more recently, the Victorian Landcare program to the tune of \$210,000. This is channeled to the group via the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority.

Members benefit from regular field days on rabbit control strategies, including fumigation, ripping and weed control, backed by the DEPI compliance program.

Volunteer burn out and a dilution of the knowledge base as retiring farmers move away is a continual challenge for the Granite Creeks committees.

Creightons Creek member Barrie Noye conceived the idea of a Ute Glovebox Rabbit Control manual, ensuring information on best practice rabbit reduction methods was accessible to the rural and broader community.

Published in 2011, the guide was made freely available to landholders and has been replicated by other Landcare groups.

“The community benefit was huge – you can’t underestimate that untargeted, unplanned and spontaneous response,” Neil said.

“Gooram Valley is now developing their own website to include information on local indigenous history and knowledge so the broader community has a better idea of the heritage of the area.”

Gecko CLAN project officer Kerri Robson said the ute glovebox guide, field days on best practice rabbit control and chemical handling courses had resulted in few incidences of non-compliance among landholders.

Mrs Robson said the guide had spawned a similar booklet on Chilean needlegrass control. She said Granite Creeks members were now exploring new ways of addressing harbour control such as unmanned drone helicopters for spraying rocky outcrops difficult to access with conventional methods.

“Due to the change in ownership of land leading to many new and absentee landholders, it has been a big challenge to engage all landholders so we have moved to evening and weekend meetings,” Mrs Robson said.

“We use face to face contact to keep people motivated and constantly updated.”