



Victorian
Rabbit Action
Network

The Victorian Rabbit Action Network (VRAN) promotes community-led action on rabbit management in Victoria, supporting people to work together for more effective and sustainable rabbit control.

VRAN's Rabbit Boot Camp and Leaps and Bounds learning network both aimed to build the next generation of rabbit management experts by sharing knowledge and building on the expertise already in the community.

The following case study is one of a series profiling the impacts of VRAN and its programs on people, communities and organisations.

CASE STUDY

Connecting government with communities to build capacity

A government agency perspective on collaborative learning and rabbit action



Leaps and Bounds learning network participants at Neds Corner station in north-west Victoria.

Government agencies as part of the rabbit management system

Parks Victoria and Agriculture Victoria are two government agencies involved in rabbit management across Victoria. Both organisations are an integral part of the Victorian Rabbit Action Network (VRAN). This case study outlines the perspectives of two key staff members on the role that VRAN has played in influencing their

organisations and the rabbit management system in which they operate.

As a biosecurity manager for established pest animals at Agriculture Victoria, John Matthews has been dealing with rabbits for almost 40 years. In his current role, he manages established pest animals (foxes, feral goats, feral pigs and rabbits) across Victoria, including developing the direction, standards and guidelines for how rabbit management is applied. John is a mentor in the VRAN Leaps and Bounds learning network and was instrumental in setting up the network's initial three-day rabbit boot camp.

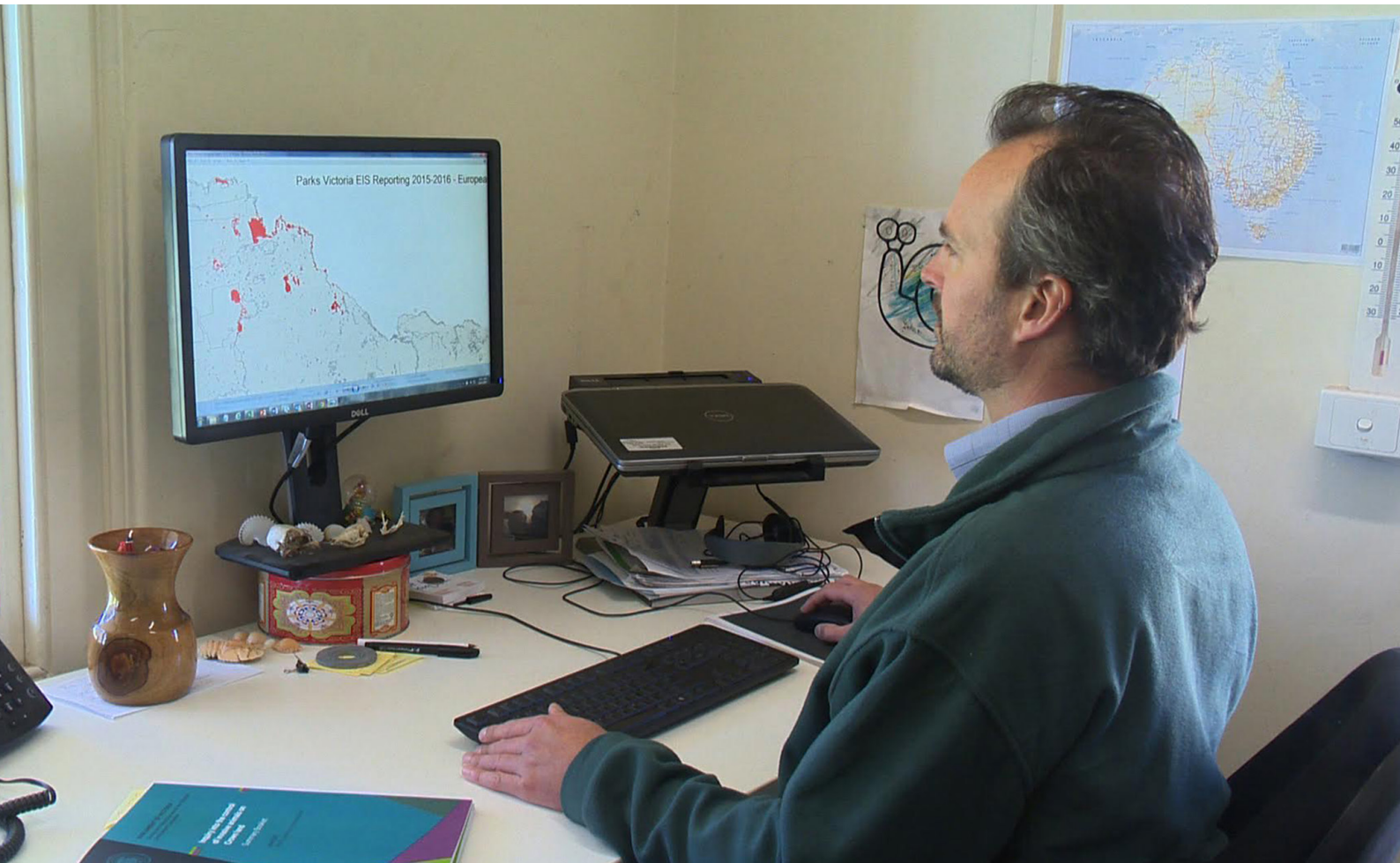


JOHN MATTHEWS
Agriculture Victoria Biosecurity Manager
VRAN mentor

"We put together the boot camp, and we talked, shared knowledge and experiences about strategy, science, biology, ecology, the best time for control, what best practice control looks like. It focused on having shared learning and getting as much out of these people and into these people as we can. They not only learnt from the experts, but from each other. They had the opportunity to experience firsthand what best management practice is."

Like John, Ben Fahey is an expert in vertebrate pest management. He works to address invasive pest species across the network of parks and reserves managed by Parks Victoria and sits on the VRAN steering group. Ben sees VRAN as:

"... a mechanism to bring together government and community so that we can talk about the complex problem of rabbits together."



BEN FAHEY
Parks Victoria
Member of the VRAN steering group

VRAN - Bringing organisations together

John notes that in the early stages of VRAN, much of the work was in simply bringing together the various organisations and individuals influencing rabbit management. This helped to map out the system.

"It was really quite enlightening, and somewhat frightening, when you see that rabbit management in Victoria was reliant on so few people, it seemed that there were so few people influencing and driving the system."

In this way, VRAN was about building better relationships and productive partnerships among public land management

agencies and between those agencies and community. Ben noted that these relationships were one of the most valuable aspects of VRAN's work.

"If you don't have forums like VRAN, you don't have collaborative approaches to manage the problem ... the benefit really is bringing together those community leaders—because that's why they are in this space—to talk about what the problems are and come up with shared solutions."

John echoed these sentiments, noting that VRAN has provided his team with direct links to other organisations and groups in the rabbit system. It means they have a better understanding of the issues, constraints, opportunities, governance arrangements and strategic direction.



Both Ben and John recognise that part of the solution for effective rabbit management is about having a participatory, landscape-scale approach with clearly understood objectives. In this context, VRAN has also helped to create a shared responsibility and understanding for rabbit control across different organisations.

"No longer is the responsibility all pointed into government ... the rabbit management system is now better understood and ownership is shared by those who influence rabbit management—Parks Victoria, all the public land managers, Catchment Management Authorities, the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Victorian Farmers Federation, and the key influencers in budget and strategy. It's important for success, rather than relying on so few. It needs shared responsibility and governance."
(John Matthews)

Linked to this shared responsibility was a common understanding of each other's positions and more strategic use of resources in rabbit management. Ben noted that the VRAN steering group provided an opportunity to explain and discuss strategic issues with other land managers across the state.

From Parks Victoria's perspective, for example, protection of biodiversity is a priority. The organisation carefully

manages rabbit populations in line with the vulnerability of particular landscapes—for example, by maintaining very low rabbit densities in north-west Victoria's Mallee country, while allowing for higher population densities in more resilient habitats in the south and east.

Similarly, John also highlighted that the communication channels formed through VRAN allowed for strategic discussions.

"Agriculture Victoria, the National Rabbit Facilitator and other key stakeholders within VRAN are in constant communication with each other, seeking and developing direction on how we can best place our resources and what future strategies and targets we can develop ... If we are going to invest in rabbits, let's all invest at the same time, understand each other's values, expectations and aspirations. Let's not invest in trees or fences before we've cleared the landscape of rabbits. In Victoria rabbits are basically the filter that all natural resource management projects have to pass through."

Part of this strategy, and one of the key benefits of the network cited by both Ben and John, was the learning fostered through VRAN's capacity building efforts.

Participants at the rabbit boot camp learning about best practice warren ripping.

Building capacity through the learning network

VRAN has worked to build capacity in the community in a range of ways, most notably through the Leaps and Bounds learning network. The network has evolved from the rabbit boot camp into a group of people sharing knowledge and experience in rabbit management across the state.

"Once every three to six months we catch up again and we identify an aspect of rabbit management that the learning network wants explore. As facilitators and mentors, it's our responsibility to put that learning package and experience together for them." (John Matthews)

For John, the growth of people through the learning network has been one of VRAN's most notable achievements.

"It's about the people and their diverse backgrounds, where they've come from and what they want out of the learning network—because not everyone is going to become a rabbit guru. But what we want is for them to have the confidence and competence to be able to advocate best management practice—engage with their own communities, share learnings and encourage participation in local communities where they have rapport and respect ... Managing rabbits is the easy bit, the available tools are proven. Rabbits are not the problem, it's the people that manage rabbits that's the challenge."

Ben also cited the learning network as one of VRAN's key interventions.

"I particularly like how VRAN was able to put together a learning network to help members of the community and organisations to come up to speed with best practice ... It's been instrumental in helping to build community capacity and understanding of the complex rabbit management problem."

The learning has not been limited to just the participants and their communities. For John, it goes both ways.

"I don't think in all my time I've ever stopped learning, but this group of people has really challenged me and my views on how people learn—how they are able to influence within local communities and various organisations and manage rabbits."

Every time we meet there is something else that challenges me to think 'hey, there's something I can improve on'. I learn something from every one of the members every time we meet and hopefully I do the same for them."



John Matthews at a warren ripping demonstration during the rabbit boot camp.

Capacity flowing back into agencies

From John, the benefits and learnings have flowed back into his team, influencing the construction of extension and compliance programs.

"We're taking those messages from the learning network ... learning about the community's behaviours, attitudes and understanding of best management practice and compliance, or their reaction to our extension and community capacity building programs. It's really important for us to position ourselves and provide not only quality advice, but to have it readily accepted."

Ben noted that the improved capacity within the community has led to improvements in the efficacy of Parks Victoria's work in this space.

"Rabbit management doesn't always work when something is happening on one side of the fence and something else is happening on the other. We spend a lot of money and a lot of time trying to deal with the problem of rabbits and their impact on biodiversity, so the more that the community understands what that problem is, then the easier our job is ... it's going to be happening at a better level now and across more areas."

Coordination and the K5 release

A key example of how VRAN has influenced coordination across the rabbit system was the release of the RHDV1 K5 calicivirus in autumn 2017. This new strain of calicivirus is not the 'silver bullet' to rabbit control, but is an important aid in helping to improve the efficacy of rabbit control across the country. Importantly, for the virus to have greatest impact, complementary control methods need to be applied in the autumn and spring following release. This requires statewide coordination across community members and public land managers.

In preparation for the K5 release, Agriculture Victoria, through John's team, delivered 75 sessions to over 2,200 people across the state, outlining how the community could best leverage its impacts.

"It's saying to people, 'here it is, here's the opportunity, you need to be ready'. And 'ready' was not six or 12 months down the track, it's immediately after the release ... so that in April or May [after the March 2017 release], you need to have the tools on the ground, you need to have your baiting organised, bulldozers, excavators, contractors and people ready to go."

The learning network was vital for extending this messaging throughout the community.

"By providing them with the tools and key messages they could go back and confidently and competently sell the story of RHDV1 K5 within their communities—because it's always going to come better from a person with local rapport, respect and reliability."

With 150 release sites across the state, the strategy was also to coordinate releases between community and public land managers. This involved encouraging public land managers, such as Parks Victoria and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, not to apply for free virus vials. Instead, the strategy was for these organisations to 'plug the gaps' left by community release sites, allowing better overall coverage.

Challenges and the future of the rabbit system in Victoria

Although community involvement in the K5 distribution and release was deemed successful, the long term management of rabbits faces a range of challenges. Engaged communities with access to the required tools is critical to successful, long term rabbit management.

Both John and Ben see the clear need for ongoing improvement of community capacity and knowledge in rabbit management. John sees VRAN as is critical to this.

"What we need is VRAN to provide that sort of direction and governance, and we need the learning network to grow and to be able to place local champions with competence and confidence in rabbit management, to be able to advocate for best practice and to provide that support to community. I see this as really important over the next five to ten years."

Ben also noted that networks like VRAN can provide significant value by giving feedback from community to government on what the issues of interest are on the ground.

"You can be in the room and hear what the current concerns are from the community—what they're actually interested in, which is sometimes different to what we think they're interested in."

For John, the clear direction for VRAN is growth and strategic expansion of the learning network.

"I think the group has just grown so much, and they're now reliant on each other to be in tune with community ... What I'd like to see is an influx of new members so that they can learn from the people that have been with us the last couple of years. I think the confidence, shared understanding and our ability to influence rabbit management outcomes that we've built in each other and for our respective organisations, as well as the strings of communication that we've built, are the most important things that have resulted from the learning network."

Leaps and Bounds participants at a rabbit monitoring site in the Strathbogrie Ranges, Victoria.





Victorian Rabbit Action Network

VRAN is led by a group of community, industry and government leaders, and was established through funding from the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre and the Victorian Government in 2014. It is now funded until 2019 by the Commonwealth and Victorian governments.

Watch a video of this case study at
www.rabbitaction.com/stories



Participants at the rabbit boot camp learning about warren fumigation techniques.