



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

Changing the approach to peri-urban rabbits

A local government perspective on collaborative learning and rabbit action



CASSIE BORG

Rural Environment Officer, Hume City Council
Participant, VRAN Boot Camp and Leaps and Bounds learning network

Learning in action

As Hume City Council's Rural Environment Officer, Cassie Borg is responsible for pest rabbit management programs and community engagement with local landholders on Melbourne's northern fringe. She has a wealth of experience in land management, conservation and bushland restoration, having worked for the Council since 2009. But when she started in her current role, pest animal management was a new challenge for her.

"When I stepped into this role three years ago I hadn't had a lot of pest animal experience on-ground. My confidence was quite low. I knew changes had to be made, but I didn't know exactly what those changes needed to look like."

Cassie's subsequent experience in the Leaps and Bounds learning network is an

example of how capacity building can lead to new approaches and improved outcomes for integrated rabbit management across the landscape.

Participating in the learning network has enabled Cassie to gain knowledge about the fundamentals of rabbit biology, management, planning and monitoring, as well as approaches to engaging the community on pest animal control.

"I really can't describe in words how beneficial the learning network has been for me. Being part of the group really helped me to make hard decisions around pest rabbit management, like how we engage the community ... and how to really promote what the success story is."

In turn, this has helped boost Cassie's confidence and her impact within Council.

"For me, being part of this learning network has helped me tremendously with my confidence. It's taught me a lot. It would probably take me a three-year degree to learn what I've learned through the learning network. Hearing other people's experiences and their success stories has been very inspirational for what I can now take to Hume City Council and bring to the pest animal program."



Rabbit damage on a revegetation site at Emu Bottom Wetlands in Sunbury, on Melbourne's northern fringe.

Representing local government, Cassie's participation in the learning network complements the perspectives of other members from Victorian Government agencies, community and Landcare groups, and various land managers with responsibility for rabbit management in their local areas.

"My role within the learning network is to have a local government perspective on rabbit control—how we go about it, and the politics and decision-making behind what some local governments do."

The mentoring and support she has received through the learning network has also helped Cassie to overcome some challenges that are particular to peri-urban rabbit management.

The peri-urban landscape: Emu Bottom Wetlands, Jacksons Creek and adjoining private properties, in the Sunbury area.



Rabbit management in peri-urban landscapes

Compared to rural landscapes, rabbit management in peri-urban areas requires more integration across multiple land tenures and engagement with multiple stakeholders, landowners and land users. In this context it is difficult to prevent migration of rabbit populations across the landscape between adjoining properties without effective collaboration and a strategic approach. This is compounded by

the budgeting and resource constraints of local government.

The township of Sunbury is in the north-west of the Hume region, and is a hotspot for rabbits. Here they cause damage to revegetation sites, contribute to erosion, damage gardens, burrow under built structures and compete with native fauna for food and habitat.

"Rabbits have always been an issue within the Hume area but are more abundant and cause more damage in the Sunbury area than the rest of the municipality. Sunbury is a great example of urban, peri-urban and rural all in the same place, and it also has some great habitat corridors that harbour rabbits. These areas are a particular challenge, because of the numerous private and public landholders."

In the heart of Sunbury, Emu Bottom Wetlands has the highest rabbit infestation in the Hume City Council area. Rabbit management at this site is complicated by larger residential properties bordering rural land, high proportions of revegetation, new development, waterways, erodible soils and areas inaccessible for rabbit control works by Council, either due to site restrictions or land management arrangements. As well as private landholders and the Hume City Council, other stakeholders with responsibility for rabbit management in the area include the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority and Melbourne Water.

Changing local government approaches to rabbit management

Since 2003, Hume City Council has been actively managing rabbits on public land, but in isolation from other land managers and the community. Council had previously implemented a Spring and Autumn rabbit program each year, using limited control methods and supported by minimal follow-up works and monitoring.

Through participating in Leaps and Bounds, Cassie has applied her learnings and encouraged the Council's approach to rabbit management to be more strategic and integrated.

"When I stepped into the role we had a very outdated Pest Rabbit Action Plan. The learning network really motivated me to re-do the Action Plan so that Council had a strategy and, moving forward, a five-year Plan. We've got a really sound, measurable Action Plan that we work towards every five years and it just means that if I leave Council, the next person who comes in can work off that Plan and it's not moving away from what we've achieved in the last three years."

Hume City Council now has a year-round rabbit control program involving thorough site preparations, follow-up works, and using multiple control methods including baiting, warren ripping, imploding, erosion control, fumigation and harbour removal. This is supported by a sound monitoring system, including mapping and increased spotlight counts.

Creating change in the way that Council approaches rabbit management is an ongoing challenge, but participating in Leaps and Bounds supported Cassie in advocating for change.

"The learning network taught me that having monitoring and measurables are extremely important to promote change within an organisation. Bringing in a lot more monitoring to our sites in regard to rabbit damage and rabbit numbers has really helped me take that to Council, to raise awareness about the rabbit issue and develop a business case to increase funding to a more appropriate level so we can better address the issue."

The learnings that Cassie has implemented since participating in the network has improved planning for rabbit control works and enabled more targeted and strategic use of resources in managing rabbit populations.

"When we run programs we try to hit the breeding, we try really hard to keep the breeding down so we're not chasing our tail the year after, whereas in previous years we didn't do that."

Improved monitoring has also been crucial in demonstrating the outcomes of Hume City Council's investment in rabbit management and for motivating continued efforts.

"Last year we had about 88 rabbits at Emu Bottom Wetlands and this year we've got 70, so next year I'd like it down to 60 or 50 and each year try to get that number down more and more."

Community-led action

Pest animal management in Hume had previously focused on controlling rabbit populations on Council managed sites, with very minimal engagement with the community and adjoining landholders. Cassie's experience with the learning network opened up her eyes to the opportunities to be achieved through greater collaboration with the community.

"I definitely learned that collaboration with landholders across the landscape is the most important part of rabbit management. So that's where we're concentrating a lot of our time—getting community members involved in doing their own works on their own land to run alongside our programs. The more people involved, the more success we're going to have."



Erosion in peri-urban Sunbury exacerbated by pest rabbits.

Hume City Council's approach to pest rabbit management is now increasingly focused on delivering education programs and information sessions to build capacity among local landholders:

"We really try to educate the community on rabbits—what their damage can be and how to approach rabbit management. The learning network has definitely taught me how to approach the community engagement side of things. A lot of landholders will do some rabbit work and then won't see a rabbit for a while, but then all of a sudden there's twenty of them on their property. So it's really trying to educate them about not dropping the ball, to do that monitoring, to do fence checks, to talk to their neighbours, to work as a community really, not just as individuals."

A key success story for more integrated rabbit management is the establishment of the Sunbury Rabbit Action Group, supported by Cassie's learnings from Leaps and Bounds.

Cassie Borg inspects rabbit-proof fencing on the border between private property and Emu Bottom Wetlands.

"After attending the learning network I was contacted by a landholder who was pretty fed up with rabbits. I met him out at his property and we were looking at how Council could support him. Knowing that working as a group is the most effective way, I suggested that he get some of his neighbours involved."

Following this, fifteen landholders came together and applied for a grant to undertake rabbit control works on their properties and engage in Council-supported capacity building activities. This



included community meetings to introduce landholders to rabbit biology and best practice control techniques, support for landholders to develop customised control strategies for their property, and the installation of rabbit-proof fencing on fifteen properties. As a result, there's been a clear reduction in rabbit numbers in the area.

"The Rabbit Action Group are now doing their own work with rabbit control on their own land and helping their neighbours out with doing their own works too. They've all had rabbit-proof fencing

installed and they're more willing to do rabbit works because they know a bit more about the biology of the rabbit and how important it is to keep on top of them."

"On some sites rabbit numbers are down to say under five or under ten per 500-metre transect, and that's all year round, not just at the high breeding season. Overall, the rabbit program, and changing the program has seen a reduction in rabbit numbers."

The future

Hume City Council is well-placed to support consistent rabbit management and sustained community involvement. Cassie's work has led to a more integrated, strategic and community driven approach to rabbit management encapsulated in Council's five-year Pest Rabbit Action Plan. Importantly, the Sunbury community is also becoming increasingly aware of the damage caused by rabbits and how they can be managed.

The nation-wide release of the K5 calicivirus in early 2017 presents opportunities for the community to continue supporting rabbit management in the area. Emu Bottom Wetlands is a potential release site for the K5 virus in 2018. Community involvement in the release, and in ongoing monitoring and conventional rabbit control activities, will be vital for taking advantage of the virus' impact.

Ultimately, the long-term success of rabbit management in the Sunbury area will depend on continued collaboration between Council, landholders and land managers, other stakeholders and the community.

"I learned that rabbit management is a long-term investment; it's not going to happen overnight. I really hope that, in the future, continuing what we're doing will see a massive reduction in rabbits. If everyone who had rabbits in this area was doing rabbit works alongside Council and alongside all other land managers that would be a success."



Emu Bottom Wetlands and neighbouring private property.



Economic Development,
Jobs, Transport
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Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre



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

