



FORMATIVE EVALUATION SUMMARY

THE VICTORIAN RABBIT
ACTION NETWORK

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01 BACKGROUND

Acknowledging the need for a shift towards more collaboration in invasive species management, the Victorian Rabbit Action Network (VRAN) has been facilitating a democratic, participatory approach to rabbit management. VRAN was established in 2014 as a joint agency-community initiative through the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre and Agriculture Victoria ('the Department'). The network's approach is built on systems thinking to understand important patterns and linkages amongst groups involved in rabbit management, and how these could be influenced to achieve more sustainable and effective rabbit management.

Its goal is to facilitate a new community-led approach to rabbit management, characterised by shared knowledge and experience, improved information flows and strengthened relationships. This 'systems strengthening' has been defined within VRAN as being built on the assumptions that people, institutions and resources operate to manage rabbits in Victoria, and that targeted initiatives can improve how each of these elements work together to enable best practice rabbit management.

02 PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of this formative evaluation is to ensure lessons are incorporated into VRAN's operation during its cycle, rather than being identified at project-end when it is too late to adapt.

VRAN's community-focused approach has the potential to provide significant learnings for not only the remainder of the project, but also for extending the approach to other states and invasive species. The evaluation was conducted through interviews (23 respondents) and a survey (15 respondents) of VRAN's members, partners and programme participants, as well as document analyses.

This summary outlines the key outcomes and impacts of VRAN, as identified through the evaluation process, and concludes with a series of recommendations to guide further development and extension of the initiative. For further information please refer to the full evaluation report.

03 SYSTEM SHIFTS

VRAN has had significant impacts on the Victorian rabbit management system, and shows strong potential to facilitate ongoing changes. Shifts in the Victorian system include:

- **More effective knowledge sharing and information flows**, particularly between the Department and land managers.
- **Growing emphasis on and preference towards collaboration**, including recognition that all participants in rabbit management can contribute expertise and ideas.
- **Reduced reliance on compliance** as a result of both points above, which have enabled problem identification and solving before compliance action is required.
- **A growing community of practice** around community-led rabbit management, with increased capacity and in-kind contributions evident across all elements of the system.

04 MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

In terms of maintaining VRAN's momentum, building on its successes and outscaling to other species and jurisdictions, a number of actions are recommended, including:

- **The Victorian rabbit management system be re-mapped** to identify new relationships and collaborations and their contribution to system shifts.
- **Knowledge sharing mechanisms and links be formalised** to maintain their legacy and sustainability.
- **An economic analysis be undertaken** to quantify VRAN's return on investment, including the benefits of strong networks and in-kind contributions.
- **The importance of relationship strengthening processes be recognised and institutionalised**, particularly the role of the National Rabbit Facilitator.
- **The lessons from VRAN form the foundations of outscaling** the approach to other species and jurisdictions.

05 KEY OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

Learning and knowledge sharing

The learning and knowledge sharing component of VRAN has been very successful. The bringing together of multiple types of knowledge and experience, covering scientific, technical and locally-based forms, has improved understanding of complexities, developed applied knowledge and built new relationships which allow ongoing and collaborative knowledge exchange.

Importantly, the mechanisms used have encouraged 'sharing' rather than just 'transfer' of knowledge.

VRAN's rabbit management conference and learning network, in particular, covered the latest in technical information and kept it relevant to the location. Both provided opportunities for a range of participants to discuss what works and what can be usefully shared. The development of the learning network has also provided local 'go-to' people who are recognised within their communities and landscapes. Because of this, VRAN's impacts are felt well beyond the learning network participants, continuing through them to their own networks and professional practices. This is likely to be a significant reach, as learning network participants are involved in a large and diverse range of agencies including catchment management authorities, Landcare groups, local government organisations and private practice.

“It's been really useful to know all these people dotted around Victoria. I know who to contact with questions, both in communities and in government, and it's been VRAN that has made that happen.”

LEARNING NETWORK MEMBER

Information flows across community, industry and government

One of the strengths of the VRAN approach to learning has been the integration of best practice rabbit management with community-led knowledge sharing through the learning network.

Positive outcomes include:

- Technical information flows from the Department to land managers have been improved. There is now better access to the latest information on rabbit management.
- The learning network has helped the Department reach more land managers, often via goodwill or in-kind contributions by network members. This has been beneficial to the Department in terms of both pest management and compliance.
- Departmental representation in both VRAN and the learning network has improved relationships between the Department and land managers. The latter now have easier access to targeted information and support.

Importantly, the information flows haven't been one-way: the new relationships between community and Department actors have provided a mechanism whereby information and experience from the community level is able to be fed into relevant sections within the Department. This has improved the Department's access to community knowledge and capacity, as well as compliance outcomes.

“Some real learning for me came from hearing about different people's experiences... I came away understanding that best practice isn't the release of a virus. It's about the thinking that's behind rabbit management, and the thinking behind what people actually do on the ground.”

LEARNING NETWORK MEMBER & LAND MANAGER

Attitudes and behavioural change

A key outcome of VRAN's participatory approach to rabbit management has been the development of a large reservoir of goodwill towards its work. This has translated to an attitude amongst respondents that the complex challenges of rabbit management can be better addressed through the collaborative approaches promoted by VRAN, as well as a shared sense that all elements of the management system can and do have ideas, practices and knowledge to contribute.

“I liked the way the rabbit conference highlighted the experience and the knowledge of different players and the idea that we all had something to learn and contribute to rabbit management.”

CONFERENCE ATTENDEE AND LANDHOLDER

Compliance

The relationship strengthening facilitated by VRAN's programmes has taken the pressure off the Department's compliance activities. Improved relationships have enabled community members to contact the Department directly and identify local areas in need of assistance. Likewise, compliance staff have access to networks of people at local level to discuss compliance concerns. This highlights increased collaboration in terms of both problem identification and problem solving.

“VRAN has enabled us to reach more people and communities. Not only are we reaching with best practices, we're also being able to build relationships which allow us to know who to contact locally.”

DEPARTMENTAL POLICY STAFF MEMBER

Limited resources

VRAN's activities have increased capacity to leverage limited resources within the system. The knowledge, skills and contacts that learning network members have developed will enable them to engage more effectively with other local initiatives in the pest management space. In addition, VRAN has been able to add value to the Department's community engagement strategies. Having Departmental representatives as part of the learning network's mentor system has been significant in this, and has provided important opportunities for information to flow from communities to the Department and vice versa, enabling ongoing refreshing of knowledge.

“I'm now the person who a lot of landholders will catch up with when they want some advice. At first this was a worry as I wasn't that confident... But having the other mentees and mentors was great because there were lots of people who I could ask questions of.”

LEARNING NETWORK MEMBER & LAND MANAGER

Legacy and sustainability

The impacts on the human elements of the system, such as new and strengthened relationships, information sharing and attitudinal shifts, represent a very good investment, with the foundations for legacy and sustainability well-defined. These include the impacts of the learning network, and the ongoing support for VRAN's programmes and the role of the National Rabbit Facilitator. All these are showing signs of institutionalisation and regeneration, though continued funding will need to be provided in the short-to-near term.

06 RECOMMENDATIONS

Reflexivity and re-mapping

The systems thinking process has provided an important foundation for VRAN. It is crucial that a reflexive, regular, ‘take a breath and review’ mechanism be instituted whereby the thinking behind the approach is re-visited and re-assessed so its focus isn’t lost within the realities of project management and the passage of time.

Similarly, it is recommended that VRAN undertake an exercise whereby relationships between actors within the rabbit system are re-mapped. This will identify the specific forms of informal and formal cooperation which VRAN has facilitated and their contribution to its ongoing successes.

Learning and knowledge exchange

To build on VRAN’s success in supporting learning and knowledge exchange, it is recommended that:

- The linkage between technical expertise in the Department and members of the learning network be further strengthened to mitigate against potential reduced technical capability within the Department due to staff losses.
- A learning network workshop be convened to focus on members’ experiences and learnings in engaging their local community. Whilst this is occurring in an ad hoc way, formalising this knowledge will strengthen members’ capacity to develop ‘networks of networks’ and very quickly increase the practical reach of VRAN.
- The reach of ‘networks of networks’ be assessed. Anecdotal evidence indicates these secondary and tertiary networks are already wide-reaching.

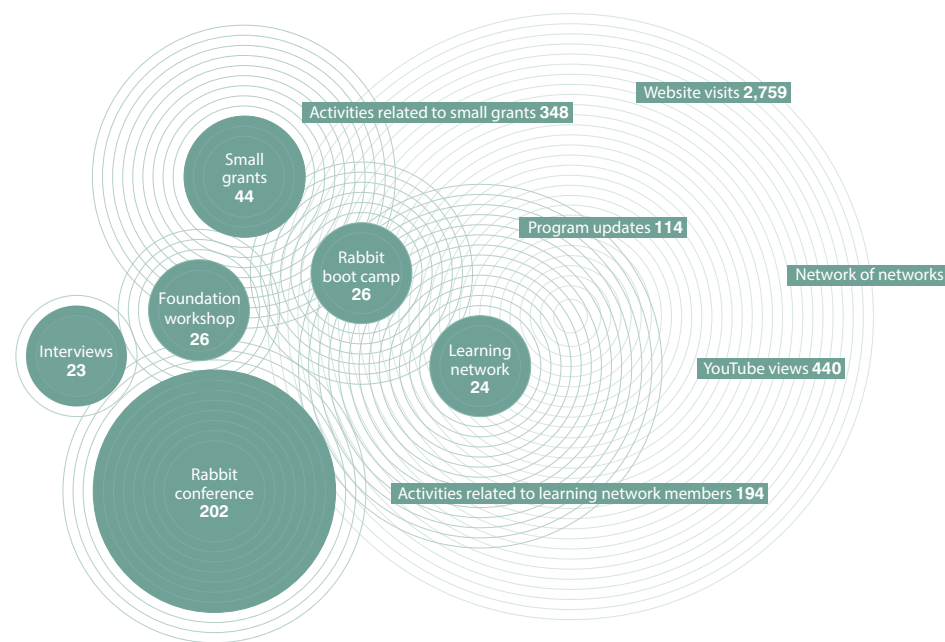


Figure 1: The VRAN ‘ripple effect’ – indicative direct, indirect and ‘networks of networks’ reach of VRAN.

Economic analysis

It is recommended that an economic analysis be undertaken to quantify the return on investment in VRAN. This will require an assessment that places an economic value on what are usually qualitative processes such as the benefits of strong networks and relationships, and goodwill, in-kind and voluntary inputs.

Relationships

Continuing its relationship strengthening processes to ensure the current levels of goodwill are maintained and developed is vital for the ongoing relevance of VRAN. The National Rabbit Facilitator will be crucial in this. It is also recommended that VRAN continue its strategic engagement with other local and regional initiatives. At this point, much of this is done through the relationships of those involved in the learning network.

It is important, too, that both VRAN and the Department look for further ways of leveraging their relationship by integrating with other Departmental programmes beyond compliance.

Outscaling

There are many lessons to be found for the management of pest species in the VRAN initiative. These should be foundational in outscaling the VRAN approach to other species. Core amongst them are the use of systems thinking, the processes of establishing learning networks and the promotion of learning through sharing experiences and knowledge. The findings of this formative evaluation may be a useful resource in the outscaling process.

Legacy and sustainability

The new forms of relationships between community stakeholders and the Department have been an important mechanism for feeding information and experience from the local level into Government agencies. It is recommended that VRAN ensure this is recognised within appropriate agencies through internal meetings and workshops or other mechanisms. Similarly, VRAN should ensure that impacts ‘on the ground’ – particularly in terms of growing in-kind contributions and attitudinal shifts – are recognised at agency level.

The role of the National Rabbit Facilitator has been identified as being crucial to the success of VRAN. In terms of legacy and sustainability, it is recommended that the complexity, skills and experience of this role is documented to ensure it is formalised in project documentation.

The learning network is exhibiting the signs of having a regenerative capacity. However, much of this is tied up with goodwill that has been generated and dependent on the commitment of members. To ensure its legacy and sustainability, it is recommended that network meetings continue, with funding at an appropriate level for this to occur, and that the learning network be carefully expanded.

07 AN APPROACH FOR THE FUTURE

VRAN’s community-led approach to rabbit management provides a significant set of experiences and principles which can be adopted and adapted across jurisdictions and pest species.

VRAN has been able to provide both the time and the space required for Departmental staff, communities and landholders to share experiences and knowledge. Critical informal relationships have been built, adoption of best practice rabbit management has been facilitated, and knowledge at all levels of the rabbit management system has been refreshed and improved. Importantly these benefits are continuing to accrue, with positive outcomes for learning, compliance and proactive rabbit management.



“ VRAN’s idea of getting people together to share things – ideas and experiences – has been one of its key ideas. It’s also one which should be the main part of any other initiatives. ”

LEARNING NETWORK MEMBER & LANDHOLDER

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