Rabbit Rescue, Control and Management

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Name: Rabbitats Rescue Society

Location: We are located in Richmond, BC, but we work with rabbits province-wide.

The following is our responses to the discussion questions. We are also submitting a PDF version of a PowerPoint presentation that we feel is relevant to the discussion.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Sorelle Saidman

Rabbitats

Challenge 2: Increasing Involvement and Shared Stewardship

Discussion Questions: How should a broad range of stakeholders be involved in wildlife management and habitat conservation decisions? What are your suggestions for a new governance model for wildlife management and habitat conservation?

- The provincial government took ownership of stray domestic rabbits and their feral offspring by deeming them 'wildlife' as soon as they were abandoned. This in turn caused the municipalities to back away from rabbit control. The loose rabbit problems became much worse under these policies thus I feel that FLNRORD has an obligation to take the lead role to fix this problem. However, there are many avenues of support.
- The rabbits fall under pets and agriculture as well as wildlife, all those sources should be mined for support. They are a animal welfare and an environmental concern. Support can be garnered from both rabbit fans and foes, eg: animal welfare groups will donate to help support the rabbits, property owners and businesses will pay for pest control. (As urban wildlife, control options are limited).
- If the rabbits are allowed to continue breeding and spread beyond the cities to native habitats and farmland, control will be impossible.
- Rabbits are barely given lip service in the provincial and local invasive species management programs.

- The provincial government must form partnerships with rescues, wildlife associations, municipalities and other government departments (eg: agriculture) to address the growing invasive feral domestic rabbits populations all over BC.

Challenge 4: Increasing Human Activity

Discussion Question: What is the most effective way of ensuring that wildlife and habitats are healthy while fostering a healthy economy to ensure life is affordable for British Columbians?

- Humans are encroaching on wildlife habitats by releasing domestic pets into the wild, and those pets in turn crowd out native species, compete for resources and/or damage native habitats.
- Feral rabbits (and pets like red-eared slider turtles) are becoming alarmingly prolific because of humans, and they need to be controlled by a combination of removing them from the environment and more aggressively regulating the sources.
- Over the last decade, the provincial government has prevented the control of abandoned rabbits by pet rescuers willing to recapture them by a prohibitive permit processes and by refusing to endorse sanctuaries capable of containing most if not all of the rabbits.
- Over the next decade, it can be rectified by setting aside contained parcels of crown land to temporarily house the trapped and sterilized rabbits until the populations are under control, a trap, neuter and release program that has worked well to control feral cats.
- Rabbits are not big travelers especially when neutered; providing minimally containable spaces will localize and eventually phase out the populations.
- The province also failed to act on a Union of Municipalities request to restrict the sales of unsterilized pet rabbits.
- Private properties can also be mandated to securely contain breeding rabbits.
- Encouraging, if not regulating, landlords and stratas to accept pets in their housing will also cut down on the abandonment, as the most prominent reason for abandonment is the lack of housing options for people with pets.
- The municipalities are responsible for animal control and should also be mandated to pick up the abandoned pets within their jurisdictions, and their shelters and rescues should be resourced to take in unwanted rabbits before they are released.

Challenge 6: Better Information

Discussion Questions: How can Traditional Ecological Knowledge, citizen science and other forms of knowledge complement science to support decision-making?
What are the best ways to share information broadly so that there is transparency and trust is gained among all parties?

- Feral rabbit control suffers from a lack of information. There are substantial differences between North American native rabbits and feral domestic European rabbits, significant differences in brain structure between wild and domesticated European rabbits.
- There are also differences with farm, pet and feral rabbits in behaviour and jurisdiction, and this also needs communication and further study for to be able to implement effective control.
- A mapping project is essential to identifying the locations and the spread of invasive European rabbits.
- A regulated pet identification system also needs to be explored and the behaviours and interactions after sterilization need to be examined.
- There is also a lot of control history that needs to be logged and analysed. (eg: the rabbit overrun of 2006 has vastly differing information about the number of rabbits, the type of rabbits, why they got out of control and what solved the issue), interviews need to be conducted with farmers, neighbours, advocates, lobby groups and others directly involved.
- Anecdotal evidence is useful when presented in volume.
- All previous 'infestations' and control procedures, whether successful or not, need to be studied and shared with input from all stakeholders.
- The effects of the feral rabbits on the environment needs further exploration, as does the effects of the environment on the rabbits.
- The legislative aspects, eg: the 'trickle down' and other effects of the 'wildlife' designation on abandoned domestic rabbits and stronger laws geared for prevention, need to be thoroughly analysed with the help of boots-on-the-ground rabbit rescue and control agencies.

Challenge 7: Human-Wildlife Conflicts

Discussion Question: What are the most effective ways to reduce wildlife-human conflicts in British Columbia?

- Economic realities of property damage caused by rabbit infestations need to be well defined with information about the segments most affected and what they are willing to do to control the issue.
- Localized preventative measures need to be explored and control information circulated.
- The European rabbits are city dwellers and as the feral colonies grow and spread out, so does the obvious attractant to predators. The cycles of rabbit infestation and predator conflicts need to be examined. The predators may be initially good for control, but then what controls the predators?
- There are no safe barriers for the rabbits nor are there many options to protect landscaping and agriculture, other than to take the rabbits out of the environment.

Challenge 8: Funding

Discussion Question: What are the best funding models, funding sources, and creative financing ideas that could increase resources for wildlife management and habitat conservation and provide additional flexibility for how funding is prioritized and allocated?

- The feral rabbit issue was greatly exacerbated by past FLNRORD policy, FLNRORD should have an obligation to help fix it by facilitating research funding, seed funding, crown property use and/or other resources.
- The government can divert crown land to contain sterilized rabbits allowing them to live out their lives in a controlled natural environment that will also diminish the need for ongoing care and maintenance funds.
- Trapping and sterilizing costs about the same as trapping and humanely euthanizing. Rescues can be invited to take over guardianship once the rabbits are sterilized. (Sterilization and containment will be paramount). Rabbit fans will donate to help save the bunnies.
- Private citizens can pay to have the feral rabbits removed from their properties
- Budgets spent on fixing rabbit damage (private citizens, municipal, provincial and federal properties) can be diverted to rabbit control.
- Partnerships agencies and grant programs can also contribute financially and in other ways, eg: municipalities can provide limited building supplies and labour to compliment a crown land lease.
- The goal is to bring the feral rabbit populations down (via trapping and prevention) allowing ongoing control from the municipalities.
- The need for funding for feral rabbit control should decrease over a 15 year control period as all the areas are cleared and the rabbit die off in the sanctuaries.
- In the long term, licensing fees charged to breeders who sell European rabbits can be implemented (to compliment identification and sterilization regulations also needed) and those funds can help finance feral rabbit control.

Additional:

Additional Questions: What challenges are we missing? What currently works well in BC for wildlife/habitat management? What changes in wildlife/habitat management are most needed for BC (i.e., what are the highest priority challenges)? Are there any challenges or opportunities listed that concern you? Why?

- Policy can get in the way of progress. The abandoned pet rabbits have propagated because of provincial policy, not in spite of it. Rescue groups were not allowed to pick them up when they were first abandoned.

- The government of the day expected people to trap and destroy the rabbits, which of course wasn't going to happen, and proper research would have determined that outcome.
- The rabbits are still mired in policy. A recent change allowed shelters and rescues to trap and possess the rabbits but at press time, permits were required to adopt out or transfer the rabbits.
- All city shelters and most rescues are designed as clearing houses, the rabbits need to leave the shelter or rescue and thus must face substantial and often insurmountable permitting challenges.