CGG Rabbit Control Program

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why does the City of Greater Geraldton undertake rabbit control programs?

The aim of the control program is to reduce the impact of rabbits on private property and the City's natural environment. The European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) is declared a pest under the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007 and falls into the C3 category of management. Under this act, landholders should have some form of management to control rabbit populations on their land. This applies even to landholders not growing crops to protect their neighbours' land from the impact of these pests.

The success of rabbit control should be measured more by how many rabbits remain, rather than by how many have been removed.

Rabbit-Free Australia states that both the environment and primary production can benefit from effective rabbit control, including:

- **More plant species and growth**: Rabbits are selective feeders and, even in small numbers, can eliminate entire species of plants. In large numbers, they can devastate entire landscapes.
- **Fewer feral predators:** Rabbits are easy prey for introduced predators like feral cats and foxes, which can help sustain predator populations that also prey on native animals.
- **Less erosion and fewer weeds:** Rabbit burrowing and vegetation destruction can leave land bare and prone to erosion, waterway degradation, and weed invasion. Rabbits can also damage roads, water tanks, and buildings.
- **More native animals:** Healthier, more abundant bushland provides food, shelter, and nesting opportunities for native animals. Coupled with fewer feral predators, this leads to healthier populations of invertebrates, reptiles, birds, and mammals.
- **Sustainable food production:** Controlling rabbits leads to increased crop and pasture growth, less damage to infrastructure, and lower production costs due to reduced need for pest and weed control.
- **Increased carbon capture:** More plant growth results in greater carbon capture.
- **Healthier ecosystems and landscapes:** All of the above contribute to healthier Australian landscapes and ecosystems.

European rabbits are among the most common and widespread animal pests in Australia. They compete with livestock and native animals for pasture and food, damage crops and native vegetation, and cause erosion. Rabbits pose a serious threat to both agriculture and native biodiversity.

What is the City doing in 2025 to control rabbits, and why in those areas?

In 2025, the City will undertake a Coordinated Rabbit Control Program between February and April. This will involve a calicivirus release, followed by the City's Annual Rabbit Baiting Program. In February 2024, the City held a Community Workshop, which highlighted substantial community interest in a coordinated rabbit baiting program alongside a calicivirus release in 2025. The virus release will be targeted at areas with the highest rabbit populations, including Glenfield, Waggrakine, Moresby, and parts of Strathalbyn.

An assessment of the City's natural areas was conducted in 2020 as part of the development of the Natural Areas Management Strategy. A total of 51 areas were identified and prioritised based on environmental, recreational, and cultural values. Due to limited City resources, a strategic approach is required to prioritise management activities that will help achieve conservation goals.

All landholders should have some form of management to control rabbits on their own property to have the greatest impact across the landscape. The City encourages neighbours to collaborate on rabbit control measures across multiple properties for greater effectiveness and to complement the City's rabbit control program.

The City asks all landholders undertaking baiting on their properties this year to do so in conjunction with the City's baiting program so that, together, we can achieve the best outcome across the landscape.

Is rabbit control undertaken on City-managed verges?

The City manages 4,460 kilometres of sealed and unsealed roads, which means there are a lot of road verges. The City does not have the capacity to carry out rabbit control across all these areas. Additionally, the City must consider the safety of children, domestic pets, and other users who frequent road verges. It is not practical to use pindone baiting or release calicivirus on road verges.

Can you tell me more about the Calicivirus?

Calicivirus also known as RHDV is a virus that typically causes disease in European rabbits.

The virus is used across Australia as a biological tool to control wild rabbit populations. It is host-specific, meaning it only affects rabbits. However, the virus is not a "silver bullet" but is instead used to suppress rabbit numbers. The virus release is the first stage of the City's 2025 Rabbit Control Program. Stage 2 will begin 2–4 weeks after the virus release and will involve rabbit baiting, warren fumigation, and destruction in areas with high environmental value, such as the Chapman River Regional Park.

Will the Calicivirus affect other animals or me?

The RHDV1 K5 calicivirus is species-specific and only affects rabbits. It will not affect humans, native animals, livestock, or domestic pets other than rabbits.

Will the virus release affect my pet rabbit?

The RHDV1 K5 calicivirus only affects rabbits. If you are concerned about your pet rabbit, please contact your local vet to seek advice and arrange vaccination. Other precautions you can take to protect your pet rabbit include:

- Keeping your pet in an insect-proof enclosure
- Keeping your pet indoors, if possible
- Avoiding contact with unfamiliar rabbits
- Reporting sick rabbits to your vet
- Ensuring good insect control
- Regularly disinfecting your pet's enclosure
- Rabbit-proofing your backyard to prevent wild rabbits from entering
- Removing uneaten food daily to avoid attracting flies that may infect your pet's food

Is there a vaccine?

There is an existing vaccine for RHDV1, known as Cylap®. Contact your local vet for advice and to get your pet rabbit vaccinated.

Based on current scientific evidence, Cylap® is effective against RHDV1 K5 (*pestSMART, 2024)*. However, the vaccine is not fully protective against RHDV2, a new strain of the calicivirus that was first detected in Australia in 2015. RHDV2 is currently the dominant strain causing deaths in wild rabbit populations.

It's important to note that there may be other strains of the virus in the region that the vaccine cannot protect against. However, the City will only release the RHDV1 K5 strain, which you can vaccinate your rabbits against.

What can I do if my rabbit is showing symptoms of Calicivirus?

Please contact your local vet for advice on supportive treatment.

Symptoms of calicivirus include:

- Restlessness
- Poor appetite
- Seizures
- Bleeding from the nose, or blood in the rabbit's enclosure
- Fever

How does the calicivirus spread through the environment?

Calicivirus spreads through direct contact with infected rabbits, as well as via their faeces, saliva, and urine. It can also be transmitted through contaminated clothing or equipment, and by insect vectors such as flies, or by birds and rodents if they encounter an infected rabbit.

How long will the calicivirus remain in the environment?

Once released, the virus can survive in the environment for up to three and a half months during hotter periods, but it can persist for up to seven and a half months in moderate temperatures (*RSPCA Australia Knowledgebase, 2025*).

When and how will the Calicivirus be released?

The RHDV1-K5 Release Program will commence on February 10th, 2025, and will take four weeks to complete. The program will include a pre-feeding period to assess rabbit numbers and encourage the rabbits to consume the clean oats. Following this, the virus will be released. The City's Integrated Pest Control contractor will carry out the virus release.

Where will it be released and why there?

The virus will be released in Glenfield, Moresby, Waggrakine, parts of Strathalbyn, and the Chapman River Regional Park. The release will target areas with the highest rabbit populations.

What do I do if I find a dead rabbit?

If you come across a dead rabbit, you can report sightings or evidence of disease through the Rabbit Scan online portal at www.rabbitscan.org.au.

Deceased rabbits on private property may be placed in the residential bin for removal as part of the regular weekly collection. If a significant number of dead rabbits is observed on public land, please contact the City for appropriate disposal. City on 9956 6600 or at council@cgg.wa.gov.au

What does the City use to bait the rabbits?

The City uses Pindone, a first-generation anticoagulant. Pindone works by blocking the synthesis of vitamin K-dependent clotting factors, which leads to fatality in susceptible animals. Poisoning with Pindone can occur from a large single dose, but it is more effective when administered as a series of smaller doses over 4 to 12 days. Pindone has a low risk to non-target species. Learn more about First Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticides here.

All landholders are obligated to control invasive species, such as rabbits, on their properties to achieve the best impact across the landscape. The City encourages neighbours to collaborate on implementing rabbit control measures across multiple properties, as this increases effectiveness and complements the City's rabbit control program.

How does the City manage non-target species?

The City undertakes baiting programs when non-target species are typically not active and follows set procedures to minimise the risk to these species. Compared to other baits, Pindone is less likely to cause secondary poisoning, and an antidote (Vitamin K) is available from veterinarians. The baits are laid at night, and the baiting sites are checked the following morning, with any deceased rabbits being removed.

Grain-eating animals, such as sheep, kangaroos, and most birds, are active during the day, while nocturnal birds of prey, like owls, are carnivorous and do not eat the baits directly. The oats used for baiting are dyed green, which makes them unattractive to birds. Additionally, birds discard the husk (where the poison is coated) and eat only the seed.

Sheep, possums, and horses are reasonably resistant to Pindone, while cattle, goats, chickens, cats, and dogs are less susceptible compared to rabbits. Pindone is a first-generation anticoagulant rodenticide (FGAR), also known as a multi-dose anticoagulant, which requires several feeds to build up a lethal dose. FGARs break down in target species more quickly than second-generation anticoagulants (SGARs, such as Bromadiolone), reducing the chance of secondary poisoning.

Free feeding is done several days before baits are laid to gauge the rabbit population and prevent excessive amounts of bait from being used. Most rabbits return to their warrens once a lethal dose is achieved, reducing the risk of secondary poisoning in non-target species. The City's baiting program is carried out within Chapman River Regional Park, away from private property. Signage is placed at the boundaries and within the baiting locations. While kangaroos are present in the park, they are in small numbers and are active during dusk and dawn. Baits are laid at night and checked early the next morning.

If you want to use Pindone bait on private property, it is recommended to use a baiting station that restricts access to non-target species. This can include fencing around the bait station with gaps that only allow rabbits through or using a mesh canopy over the station to prevent larger grazing animals from accessing the bait.

What if my dog or cat eats a poisoned or sick rabbit?

For a dog to consume a toxic dose, it must eat multiple poisoned rabbits over time. A cat would need to consume an entire rabbit over several days for it to become lethal. However, if a dog or cat directly eats the poisoned bait, they may become poisoned. An antidote is available from veterinarians.

If you are walking your dog in Rabbit Control areas, please keep your animals leashed to avoid poisoning. Signage will be placed in all baiting and virus release areas. In the event that a domestic animal shows symptoms of poisoning, an antidote is available from local veterinarians. This consists of an injection of Vitamin K (1 mg/kg live weight), which counteracts the effects of Pindone in the body by increasing blood clotting abilities.

Symptoms of poisoning include:

- Excess salivation
- Vomiting
- Bloody fluid in the mouth
- Blood in the faeces
- Progressive general weakening

Pindone is a multi-dose anticoagulant, meaning the baits need to be consumed multiple times over several days for a lethal dose. It also breaks down more quickly in rabbits than other poisons, such as second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs), which limits the chance of secondary poisoning.

Do you use 1080 to poison rabbits?

No, the City of Greater Geraldton does not use 1080 poison to control any pest species within its boundaries. 1080 is highly toxic to non-target species, pets, and humans, so it is not used in rural-residential areas. Baiting of rabbits with 1080 can only be carried out under a special permit issued by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority. It is a restricted chemical product and can only be used by authorised operators.

How can I stop rabbits eating my plants on my property?

Exclusion is the best method. There are several techniques you can use to prevent rabbits from accessing areas of vegetation.

Some options include:

- Tree guards (commercial or wire mesh)
- Fencing off areas of vegetation
- Eliminating potential rabbit habitat by removing extensive weed growth and waste piles

These methods are ideal for small-scale rabbit control and are preferable if you want to undertake more humane methods to control rabbits. However, the effectiveness depends on the extent of the vegetation you want to protect and the number of rabbits. Any fencing should be constructed to rabbit-proof standards, for example, with mesh buried underground to prevent rabbits from digging under the fence, and plant guards tall enough to stop rabbits from nibbling on vegetation growing over the top of the guards.

Benefits of exclusion include:

- A more humane method of rabbit control
- Long-term protection for smaller areas or high-value crops (such as garden beds, vegetable patches, or newly planted trees)

Drawbacks of exclusion include:

- Labour-intensive
- Expensive (materials and labour costs) depending on the size of the area to be protected
- Needs to be constructed to a standard that will effectively exclude rabbits
- Requires regular maintenance
- Rabbits within the fenced area will need to be removed to ensure they are not trapped, making this method less practical on a larger scale

Can I trap rabbits on my property?

You can trap rabbits on your property. Any traps used must meet animal welfare and ethics standards (e.g., steel-jaw traps are illegal in most states). Any traps other than a cage trap will require a permit from the Department of Agriculture and Food – forms are available on their website. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2002 and Animal Welfare Regulations 2003, rabbits caught must be handled and killed humanely.

Trapping can be effective in smaller-scale, targeted areas where other techniques are not practical, such as small, fenced areas. However, it can be labour-intensive, time-consuming, and requires some skill. Trapping is only suitable as a control method when rabbit numbers are low. There is a potential risk of trapping non-target species, so any traps should be monitored, and non-target species should be released immediately.

Can I shoot rabbits on my property?

If you want to use a firearm for vermin control, you will need a firearm licence and landholder's permission. The size of your property will determine the maximum calibre size of the firearm you can use. Shooting rabbits should only be performed by skilled operators who have the necessary experience with firearms and hold the appropriate licences and accreditation.

Shooting can be a humane method of rabbit control if carried out by experienced, skilled, and responsible shooters; the animal can be clearly seen and is within range; and the correct firearm, ammunition, and shot placement are used. Achieving a humane kill with a single shot can be difficult, as rabbits are a small target. Wounded rabbits should be located and dispatched as quickly and humanely as possible.

Shooting is a common method used in rural areas, but in semi-rural areas, this technique is deemed inappropriate. It is not considered an effective or efficient rabbit control technique. Shooting is not suitable in the vicinity of human habitation.

What about absentee owners?

Landowners who are not managing declared pests can be notified, and infringement notices can be issued by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD). However, due to the high level of rabbit infestations across the State, and the ability of rabbits to spread across a wide geographic area, enforcement is practically impossible. Declared pest species are listed on the Western Australian Organism List under the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007 (BAM). Section 30 of the Act states that management of declared pests is the responsibility of landowners and managers.

The City encourages a high level of collaboration between landowners, community groups, local government, conservation organisations, and pest management agencies. Rabbits, unfortunately, do not recognise tenure boundaries such as fences, borders, or land-use types. Therefore, we encourage land managers to work together to manage rabbits on their properties.

The City provides information and advice on best-practice rabbit control management and regularly undertakes pest control measures on City-managed natural areas with high environmental value. These include Chapman Regional Park, Chapman River Estuary, Chapman River Wildlife Corridor, and Greenough River.

City of Greater Geraldton
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