

Aotearoa – Land of the Long White Cloud

Please Ma'am, is this New Zealand? Or Australia?

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865

The New Zealand government had realised as early as 1947 that the industry that had grown up around pest rabbits was not solving the rabbit problem. Rather, it was seriously compromising development of the sheep and wool industries. As a consequence it was decided that the only solution was to progressively ban the sale of rabbit products, so forcing farmers to use much more realistic ways of dealing with the problem than hunting and trapping. When attempts to use myxomatosis failed, despite its successful release in Australia (Filmer 1953), great reliance was placed on intensive development of dense, high-value pastures to make land less habitable for rabbits and provide a strong economic imperative for keeping them out. Astounding progress was made and the rabbit problem was largely resolved (Gibb and Williams 1994). However, in some areas, pasture improvement was not economically feasible and rabbit clearance relied much more heavily on poisoning and shooting. Techniques like warren ripping were not generally appropriate because rabbits in New Zealand are not as dependent on warrens as they are in Australia. In the drier regions of Central Otago a heavy price was paid for improvements in control, and often these could not be met from the limited sheep and wool production the pastures allowed. As a consequence, government subsidies were widely used in the drive towards rabbit eradication.

As time wore on, it was realised that the goal of eradication was unachievable and New Zealand government subsidies for rabbit control work were progressively reduced during the 1980s. Farmers in drier regions of South Island were unable to continue with effective rabbit control because of the high costs, and rabbits began to increase again. The accrued benefits from having fewer rabbits were lost. Farm productivity decreased and weeds increased noticeably.

With knowledge of Australian experiences it was argued that the introduction of myxomatosis should again be considered, this time with the European rabbit flea as a suitable vector. So once again rabbit problems in South Island's high country were reviewed, through the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, but the idea of using myxomatosis was again rejected.

Instead of myxomatosis, an integrated land management program to deal with rabbits and weeds was proposed. This gained momentum with renewed government financial support, and considerable progress towards reducing rabbits was again made. Great emphasis was also placed on helping people understand the processes leading to degradation of the land. Once again, a lack of funding after the program ended meant that the chronic problem remained unresolved. Things reached a point where John Aspinall, Chairman of the South Island Committee of Federated Farmers, argued that business losses on many high-country sheep-growing properties were about the same as the cost of dealing with rabbits – in other