

Rabbit busters

Buster: I'm Buster Bunny!
 Babs: And I'm Babs Bunny!
 Buster & Babs: No relation.

Warner Brothers, *Tiny Toon Adventures*, 1990–1992

With the success of RHD in reducing rabbit numbers, several Australian states began major programs to encourage farmers to eliminate remaining rabbits. They wanted no repeat of the mistakes made after the spread of myxomatosis when, despite CSIRO's best efforts, many landholders failed to take the opportunity to finish rabbits off. Persuading them wasn't an easy task. With rabbit numbers so low, many farmers argued that there was no need to take that extra effort or spend additional money. 'Wasn't the research investment all about finding a more effective solution and saving that effort?' they asked.

Among the new programs, one initiated by the Victorian Government was called 'Rabbit Buster'. Twenty million dollars were invested over 6 years (1996–2003), the money going directly to Landcare groups to encourage the removal of rabbits over whole districts. Similarly, in South Australia, 'Operation Bounce-back', a program centred on the semi-arid Flinders Ranges, was expanded to include rabbit control work as well as continuing its original objective of eliminating foxes and feral goats.

In general, these operations were carried out over huge areas, with landholders or contractors destroying rabbit warrens with large tractors dragging metre-long tines through the soil to destroy underground labyrinths. This is commonly referred to as 'rabbit warren ripping'. The scale of such work is apparent from the example of South West Rabbit Control Group in New South Wales, which destroyed 290 000 rabbit warrens over 6 million hectares (Connelan and Croft 2002). In a specific example, David Lord on Thackaringa sheep station in far western New South Wales ripped over 28 000 rabbit warrens on his own property using a 180 kW (250 horse-power) bulldozer with five heavy tines attached to its 3.5 m wide hydraulic drawbar. In his case the work was subsidised by Natural Heritage Trust funds, which met 50% of total costs.

Objective documentation and evaluation of this work was attempted in only a few cases. For example, Tim Ferraro and Don Burnside analysed information from 75 landholders who had invested \$400 000 to match funding provided by the New South Wales Government under the 'West 2000' scheme (Ferraro and Burnside 2001). In that particular instance, rabbit warrens had been ripped across some 200 000 ha at the relatively low cost of about AU\$3.60/hectare.

As a result of their analysis, Ferraro and Burnside considered that the investment of this public money in rabbit control was difficult to justify in terms of encouraging further rabbit control work. Only about one-third of the land-holders indicated that they would continue