



GONE TO THE DOGS

When bushfires swept through south–eastern Australia in the summer of 2003, stock and wildlife losses were immense. In the wake of the fires, one animal has thrived and become a major pest in the region, as a House of Representatives committee is finding out.

Story: Andrew Dawson

AS IF the bushfires weren't enough to cope with.

Farmers still recovering from the devastating summer of 2003 now face a different threat which, according to one federal parliamentarian, might have been avoided if action had been taken after the fires.

The federal Member for Hume (NSW), Alby Schultz, wants to know why hundreds of wild dogs weren't killed by state authorities when packs were seen roaming unprotected in the Kosciuszko National Park following the 2003 bushfires.

Mr Schultz, who chairs the House of Representatives Agriculture Committee, hopes this will be one of many questions answered during a wide-ranging inquiry his committee is conducting into the impact of pest animals on agriculture.

Recent figures indicate that foxes, rabbits, pigs, rodents, deer, goats, cats, wild horses, cane toads and wild dogs cost the Australian economy more than \$720 million each year.

Mr Schultz can understand the anger of so many farmers trying to prevent wild dogs killing and maiming their livestock.

"I think the wild dog problem has always been an emotional issue, but it's become more emotional now

because the dogs are attacking more and more livestock on properties adjoining areas such as national parks," Mr Schultz says.

"In the Kosciuszko when we had that horrific bushfire in 2003 that basically destroyed nearly the whole of Kosciuszko and parts of Canberra, there was a golden opportunity for the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW to undertake an eradication program of those wild dogs because they had no cover.

"The wild dogs were roaming out of the parks into agricultural land to attack domestic livestock looking for something to eat because of the bushfires. I don't know why a concerted program to eradicate these dogs wasn't undertaken.

"There may be a legitimate reason for it, but I thought it was a golden opportunity to wipe out the wild dogs."

The inquiry has received more than 80 submissions, including from farmers in the Monaro region of NSW that borders the ACT and Victoria.

Ernie Constance, a sheep grazer from the area, told the committee that his own economic loss from wild dogs killing hundreds of sheep since 1999 is around \$200,000. But he feels that the emotional cost has been much more.

Photo: Ferals Out

Continued page 28 ►

“I have seen a sheep getting around with a hole in his ribs and enough intestines hanging out to fill a nine-litre container.”

“It is extremely distressing when you go around your paddocks and you find animals not only dead, but maimed. I have seen a sheep getting around with a hole in his ribs and enough intestines hanging out to fill a nine-litre container,” Mr Constance says.

“We try to do the best we can for our animals but at times it just seems so hopeless—there’s nothing we could do because the dogs just came at night and killed and were gone in the morning.

“My daughter was working here at the time, not long out of school. It was really, really distressing for her to go around the paddocks and come back to report to me of more sheep torn to pieces. That’s probably worse than the actual monetary cost.”

Mr Constance hopes the federal government can help him combat what has long been regarded as a state problem.

“I feel somewhere along the line that we have to have ‘right to farm’ legislation, because farmers really need to be able to control feral pests on their properties,” he says.

“We are conservationists at heart but we still need to live.”

He is optimistic about how this particular parliamentary inquiry can impact on him and other farmers with similar problems combating pest animals.

“It depends to what extent they take on board what we are saying. I guess as long as we put before parliamentarians and the country in general that there are problems in the bush and that we don’t just sit on our backside watching the wool grow. We are out here working against weeds, wild dogs and other pest animals and hopefully someone, somewhere will realise what has to be done.

“I’m looking for a future not only for myself but for my sons on this property. A lot of people don’t realise the problems on the land and if we all sit back and do nothing people with other interests will end up with all the say.”

Mr Schultz believes the wild dog represents the biggest threat to agriculture based on the evidence received by the committee so far.

“Wild dogs kill huge quantities of sheep and attack young cattle—estimates of about \$33 million in economic loss alone,” he says.



Noeline Franklin says wild dogs have had a devastating impact on her family. Photo: Andrew Dawson

“In terms of other animals causing damage you have pigs, goats, foxes and cats but the foxes and cats tend to prey more on our native fauna such as small marsupials and birds.”

Another wool producer and authority on the wild dog problem, Noeline Franklin, from the Brindabella valley west of Canberra, struggled to contain her emotions when talking about the sheep killed or maimed by the dogs. While her farmhouse was only just spared from the bushfires in 2003, all of her expensive dog fencing was destroyed.

“Our families are under threat all of the time—when is the next attack going to be,” Ms Franklin says.

“It is not only the economic impact—it’s the emotional one. It’s very traumatic to wonder if today you have got to make decisions about putting down maimed animals.”

Ms Franklin says the wild dog problem has had a devastating impact on her family’s long association with farming in the region.

“It basically sent my father and uncle to the wall and our family has been here in the valley 160 years.

“Over the years we have lost about 700 adult sheep. We have also lost a lot of lambs over the years, in spite of us having

electric fencing, guard dogs and very intensive trapping programs. The dogs just keep coming.”

Ms Franklin warns that wild dogs are not only posing a threat to farmers.

“Since the fires in 2003, the dogs have basically cleaned out the wildlife in the area burnt.

“The big picture is that the wild dogs are out of control from south-east Queensland right through to Melbourne.

“What we need is a greater commitment from all governments at all levels to let us get on with trapping and implementing an integrated eradication program.”

Ms Franklin believes native fauna will suffer the most if farmers are driven off their land by continual stock losses.

“The loss of wildlife is just huge—most stockmen across the mountains admit to about a 95 per cent loss of wildlife on their old grazing leases.

“The wildlife is just about exhausted. Ecologically the implications are huge—3,000 dogs could eat about 900 tonnes of wildlife or 40 semi-trailer loads of native fauna.

“But the park managers don’t know how many wild dogs they have and what damage they are doing. We see first hand

the damage the dogs do when they come out of the bush.”

Alby Schultz says many wild dogs are noticeably bigger and more dangerous than domestic dogs.

“Wild dogs are hybrid dogs with some interbred with dingoes or with game dogs that have been deliberately let go or lost in forests by hunters,” he says.

“Some of the wild dogs that trappers catch really have to be seen to be believed—many are huge animals and some can even resemble tigers because of the cross-breeding that has occurred in the wild. They are ferocious, dangerous animals that need to be eradicated.”

Managing ranger of the Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board, Tim Seears, is one of those on the frontline against wild dogs and other pest animals. His handful of pest controllers killed 222 wild dogs in a vast rural area stretching from Canberra to the Victorian border last year.

“That’s a record—probably because of the amount of people out there working,” Mr Seears says.

“Those figures don’t include what’s been baited. In past years we used to only get 60 or 70 dogs.”

He believes the management plan is having an impact in the Monaro.

“Within our region we are a lot luckier than some other areas because we have had an advisory panel set up for a few years now,” he says.

“Because of that, we have more people on the ground and there has been more funding come into the area to carry out pest animal control on both private and adjoining crown land.”

A submission by the Bureau of Rural Sciences is blunt in its assessment of the



Wild dogs kill huge quantities of livestock. Photo: Ferals Out

challenge ahead in containing the wild dog problem.

“Because wild dogs can injure and kill many sheep and goats in a single night, they can have a dramatic economic and social impact on individual landholders,” the Bureau says.

“Where grazing is conducted on isolated properties surrounded by forested areas, wild dog impact is almost inevitable. Resultant landholder complaints have required neighbouring National Parks and State Forests in many areas (particularly Victoria and New South Wales) to devote a considerable proportion of their budgets to wild dog control, often at the expense of other pest animal and weed management.”

The Bureau says wild dogs are intelligent and elusive and the main control techniques, such as poison baiting and trapping, are not completely effective and pose risks to native fauna. They are also labour-intensive and therefore expensive.

“Research supported by the BRS-administered National Feral Animal Control Program and the Pest Animal Control CRC may lead to significant improvements in the cost-effectiveness of wild dog control,” the Bureau says.

Tackling the huge problem of pest animals is prompting Mr Schultz to explore how the federal government can assist with providing training or apprenticeships to

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young people wanting to learn the ropes as pest animal controllers from an ever-ageing group of experienced dogmen.

“I think those suggestions in some submissions have some sound validity to them but that of course has to be undertaken in some way, shape or form with the cooperation of states or local government people at state level,” Mr Schultz says.

“That’s important because all our doggers and trappers as we call them are ageing and their skills will be lost, if we don’t develop a training program that can teach younger people what they know from years of experience hunting and trapping these feral animals.” ■

The House of Representatives Agriculture Committee is holding public hearings on the pest animals inquiry in locations throughout Australia. During a recent visit to Tasmania the committee heard that a major problem is browsing of pasture, field crops and tree seedlings by native animals (wallabies and possums) and feral deer. For more information on the inquiry, visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind or email aff.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4500.

Urban areas also at risk

While the wild dog problem is of particular concern to people living in rural areas of Australia, a recent study on the economic impact of wild dogs, commissioned by the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines, has found a sharp increase in reports about wild dogs roaming residential areas of coastal Queensland.



Wild dog roaming the streets of Agnes Waters (Qld). Photo: Ferals Out

“These wild dogs have been the cause of complaints and incidents of threatening behaviour towards humans, family pets and medium-sized livestock on the fringe of settled areas,” the report says.

“Evidence is mounting that the entry of wild dog populations into urban areas is posing a disease threat to humans. In Townsville, the wild dogs caught in the suburbs as part of a control program were tested for parasites, and in a study conducted by Dr Bruce Copeman, Parasitologist of James Cook University, *Echinococcus granulosus* (hydatids) were discovered in 25% of the dogs tested.”