

Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water & Environment

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
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Dear Secretary

I provide the following submission to the Senate Inquiry into the impact of feral deer, pigs and goats in Australia.

Introduction

Agriculture and tourism focused on natural values are significant contributors to the Tasmanian economy through the generation of jobs and income by selling high quality and safe products to local, national and international markets. Both these industries are heavily reliant on maintaining our natural assets hence the Government aims to implement policies that manage the interaction between these industries, wildlife and feral domestic animals. Feral pigs and goats are present in Tasmania as extremely low populations in small isolated areas hence they will not be discussed in this submission. Fallow deer is a partially protected species under the *Nature Conservation Act 2002* meaning the species is subjected to recreational hunting during a designated season and its interaction with agriculture can be managed using Crop Protection Permits.

The Department of Primary Industries Parks Water and Environment is responsible for implementing Government policies to foster agricultural development and maintaining natural and cultural values in Tasmania.

Addressing Terms of Reference

a. *The current and potential occurrence of feral deer, pigs and goats across Australia*

Fallow deer were introduced to Tasmania for recreational hunting in the 1830s and established populations in an area which became known as the core range (Attachment I.) Subsequently natural population increase and release from deer farms has resulted in the population increasing and spreading from this original core range thereby increasing its interaction with high value agricultural pursuits, urban environments and conservation areas. If left unmanaged fallow deer could potentially increase in number and range thereby negatively impacting on agriculture, conservation and urban environments.

- b. *The likely and potential biosecurity risks and impacts of feral deer, pigs and goats on the environment, agriculture, community safety and other values.*

Fallow deer and its management is a highly emotive issue as stakeholder groups often hold opposing views as to how it should be managed and the population that can or should be sustained in the various landscapes. Recreational hunters taking animals for food and trophies are keen to sustain the resource in sufficient numbers that ensure a long term viable recreational pursuit that can deliver high quality trophies and meat. As many deer reside on private agricultural land they compete with domestic animals for the grazing resource and can reduce crop yields. Some farmers are therefore happy to tolerate a deer population which can earn them hunter access fees whilst others aim to eliminate deer from their properties. The flora within conservation areas has evolved in the absence of grazing by large herbivores such as deer. Whilst the impact of such grazing is largely unquantified it is considered undesirable that deer populations remain in these ecologically sensitive areas.

Deer populations establishing in or near closely settled urban areas pose safety and amenity issues. From the perspective of safety deer crossing busy roads can result in traffic accidents and the associated human and physical costs. They can also invade urban amenity areas causing considerable damage and potential negative interactions with people recreating in these areas. Similarly the presence of deer in these areas may lead to the unsafe use of firearms and the associated potentially serious consequences.

- c. *The effectiveness of current state and national laws, policies and practices in limiting spread and mitigating impacts of feral deer, pigs and goats.*

The Tasmanian Government is cognisant of the diversity of opinion regarding fallow deer in the Tasmanian environment and aims to develop and implement policies that are balance and meet stakeholder expectations regarding deer management. To this end the Tasmanian Game Council has been formed to provide advice to Government on deer and other browsing wildlife management.

In 2017 the Tasmanian Legislative Council initiated an inquiry and report on wild fallow deer in Tasmania. In response to this work the previous Hodgman Government prepared and released a policy document (Attachment 2) in November 2017. The initiatives in this response, together with the Supporting Recreational Hunting Policy (Attachment 3), are now being implemented by my Department. These initiatives are being implemented through a newly created branch known as Game Services Tasmania within the AgriGrowth Tasmania Division of the Department of Primary Industries Parks Water and Environment. Game Services Tasmania works closely with all stakeholder groups so as to take a holistic approach to managing deer and other browsing wildlife species.

- d. *The efficacy and welfare impacts of currently available control and containment tools and methods, and the potential for new control and containment tools and methods.*

Under the *Wildlife (General Regulations) 2010* deer in Tasmania are currently controlled by shooting from the ground with a rifle of .240 calibre or greater capable of delivering a projectile with a minimum kinetic energy at 100 metres of 1350 joules. Use of this firearm together with operator skill is considered sufficient to ensure a humane and sudden death occurs.

Without specific approval harvesting antlerless deer is prohibited during the fawning season so as to minimise adverse animal welfare consequences for fawns left without a lactating mother.

Cost effective tools (such as ultrasonic and electronic devices) that effectively deter deer from entering high value agricultural crops and pastures would be useful for helping to minimise agricultural impact and possible population increase by limiting available feed.

Controlling fallow deer in closely settled peri-urban environments is challenging because the use of firearms is limited or not possible due to public safety concerns. My Department is therefore investigating the efficacy of using sedatives such as diazepam and nets to capture deer so as they can either be removed from the area or humanely destroyed without risk to public safety. The deployment of such tools is resource intensive because deer populations must be located and attracted over a significant time period to a suitable location where the tools can be deployed.

Whilst the Government recognises the need to sustainably manage the fallow deer population to achieve a number of outcomes and thus the importance of maintaining regulatory controls it also recognises the need to minimise regulatory burden on stakeholders. To this end it has committed to issuing five year crop protection permits but this must be done with the appropriate monitoring that achieves a relatively stable deer population or one that trends relatively evenly in the desired direction.

e. *Priority research questions*

Sustainably maintaining an acceptable wild fallow deer population can be a challenge because at some point the population must be accurately assessed and then regularly monitored. The Tasmanian Government has committed to undertaking a study to estimate the population of wild fallow deer in the state along with its regional distribution. The output from this work will be used to provide a base line population estimate against which the impacts of future management strategies can be assessed.

One of the challenges with this work will be to accurately estimate the population in areas where it is currently low but with potential for expansion as many of the currently recognised methodologies require a minimum threshold population in order to provide reliable population estimates. The impacts of wild fallow deer in conservation areas particularly on vegetation regenerating after a fire event are not well known. The University of Tasmania has therefore been resourced to undertake a study which will provide further information to Government.

These research issues are unique to Tasmania although methodologies used in other locations may be applicable when adapted to the Tasmanian landscape and ecological systems. Given the significance of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area investment in such research has local, national and international significance.

f. *The benefits of developing and fully implementing national threat abatement plans for feral deer, pigs and goats*

As previously stated in this submission management of wild fallow deer in Tasmania is aimed at achieving outcomes acceptable to a diverse range of stakeholders. Consequently before any national plan associated with managing wild fallow deer was adopted in Tasmania it would need to deliver or contribute to the delivery of outcomes desired by the local community. A national approach often brings economies of scale and much needed resources so Tasmania would value the opportunity to engage in development of a national approach with commitment to implementation being dependent upon its relevance to the local situation.

Yours sincerely

Wes Ford
ACTING SECRETARY