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Lifting beef production in Fitzroy Basin through best practice predator management

A collaborative and coordinated control and monitoring program aimed at reducing pest animal populations and protecting agricultural assets will ultimately lift beef productivity in Queensland's Fitzroy Basin.

Funded by Meat and Livestock Australia and supported by the National Wild Dog Action Plan and Fitzroy Basin Association (FBA), the Barfield Road Producer Group aims to demonstrate improved calf survival and productivity gains in beef enterprises through the delivery of best practice wild dog management.

The five-year [Producer Demonstration Site \(PDS\)](#) is using the adoption of best practice predator control programs, including meat/manufactured baits, Canid Pest Ejectors, trapping with foothold traps, shooting and monitoring, to improve the capacity to manage feral animal species.

Property pest management plans have been developed with each participant to determine their property scale control programs.

National Wild Dog Management Coordinator Greg Mifsud and wild dog control technicians advised on the technique, locations and timing of control based on each property's annual cattle production program, the ecology of the wild dogs in the region and seasonal conditions.

Landholders have been provided with training and are monitoring wild dog activity using the WildDogScan app to assess the outcomes of their control programs.

FBA Land Management Officer Kate Woolley said the use of WildDogScan by individuals and the group provided a more accurate account of control activities and helps with reporting requirements.

Mrs Woolley said FBA and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries had worked with producers on Barfield Road since early 2019.

The group has drafted a strategic plan detailing six themes: environmental sustainability, animal health and welfare, business, people and community, innovation and new technology, and marketing.

Mrs Woolley said wild dog densities within the area surrounding the group were considered medium to high.

"The predation of wild dogs on both young and old cattle causes significant losses to the industry through condemned meat and calf and weaner losses," she said.



“Group members are frequently looking at ways to improve productivity and animal welfare outcomes, including better wild dog control using the framework for best practice pest animal management.”

Mrs Woolley said the prevalence of hydatid disease in cattle would likely increase across the region as wild dog numbers continued to grow in the absence of coordinated wild dog management programs.

As definitive hosts, wild dogs carry the adult tapeworm and spread eggs throughout the landscape in their faeces. Humans can become infected by handling infected dogs or their faeces.

The Barfield Road Group also focuses on the wild dog borne disease Neosporosis, a parasite causing bovine abortion, sick calves, decreased milk yields and reduced weight gains.

The economic impact on cattle through direct predation, disease and downgrades accounted for over half of Queensland’s economic losses to wild dogs, estimated at \$67 million per year (Hewett 2009).

The Fitzroy region is home to 13 per cent of the national herd across 3500 properties, and given wild dog prevalence across the landscape, Mrs Woolley believes all graziers in the region are impacted by calf damage and/or the risk of disease from wild dogs.

“This project aims to not only provide data around the effects of wild dog control on the survival of calves from pregnancy through to weaning but also demonstrate the tried and tested methods and techniques for wild dog control in a coordinated manner and the economic impact it has on individual producers.”

Greg Mifsud said population-level control of wild dogs needs to be coordinated over a larger area involving as many properties as possible.

He said community baiting provides the most cost-effective approach to population-level control.

“Asset protection control delivered when livestock are susceptible to predation, during calving and weaning, relies on the delivery of small amounts of targeted control at strategic locations such as water points, drainage lines or isolated areas of the property where wild dogs are likely to reside, or around paddocks where calving is likely to take place,” Mr Mifsud said.

“Corridors between neighbouring properties may also be targeted to prevent recolonisation by wild dogs from other properties.”

Barfield Road Producer Group spokesperson, Melinee Leather, “Barfield Station” said the impetus to form the PDS was “power in numbers” to address the problem of wild dog borne disease and predation.

Blood testing had revealed neospora infection among cattle from properties in the group, with rates up to 20 per cent.

“We knew we had a big problem with wild dogs, not only from dog bites on calves and unexplained pregnancy losses, but the feedback from Teys Biloela on our animal health data is 80 per cent hydatid damage within the consigned slaughter cattle,” Mrs Leather said.

“The carcasses are not condemned but the offal is resulting in a significant loss for the abattoir and us.

“What prompted me to help form this PDS is finding an answer to what we are losing in productivity. Whilst those animals appeared perfectly healthy but had hydatids in their livers, are we losing productivity in terms of weight gain per animal?”

Mrs Leather said shooting was the primary control tool used in the past to manage wild dogs on the organically certified Barfield Station.

“Two of the properties in the PDS are certified organic and participate in the baiting program by using uncertified areas. We just adapted and made it work,” she said

“All of us use working dogs so we were a bit frightened about baiting, but we recently received canid pest ejector kits to trial, and hopefully that will be a good outcome for us.”

Mrs Leather said the alerts of sightings on the WildDogScan app were particularly valuable to the group.

FBA has provided strategically placed remote cameras to monitor wild dog movement.

“The property pest management plans formalised what we were thinking and gave us direction – it is a living document we can adapt as we go along.

“We are taking part in a remnant vegetation pilot which includes pest management so this plan will be valuable for that. An integral part of that application was giving the definitive type of predator control we were considering.

“Those pest management plans are great documents to share when you are collaborating with other organisations and for our organic, European Union and Grasslands certification audits. It is a powerful document to show customers from international markets.”

Mrs Leather said Greg Mifsud had assisted with the formulation of the property pest management plans and conducted trapping training.

“Greg was critical in that planning process, ensuring we received the information and equipment needed.”

Mrs Leather said the group now carries out a coordinated ground baiting and monitoring program on a landscape scale.

“We have two other separate properties we are implementing similar programs on, and other producers are doing the same, so it has increased activity and awareness in an area even larger than the PDS.”

The Queensland Herbarium carried out a flora and fauna survey on Barfield Station last year, setting a baseline for flora and fauna and wild dog activity was picked up in these reports.

“It will be nice to come back in five years to do another survey and see what the difference is. Wild dog management is a critical part of that – the government and ourselves both recognise the importance of it,” Mrs Leather said.

“If we can establish the baselines, do the controls and see what the difference is, it would be a very nice outcome.”



For more information on the PDS project site click [here](#).

Ends

Caption: (Barfield 89) Landholders in the Barfield Road Producer Group are using community baiting as the most cost-effective approach to population-level predator control.

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Helpful links:

www.wilddogplan.org.au