MARLBOROUGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

THE MARLBOROUGH RABBIT

Issue 5, February 2015

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi All,

For those of you who I haven't met yet, I am Shona Sam, a Senior Biosecurity Officer at the Council. I currently run the rabbit programme along with a few other biosecurity programmes.

The Marlborough Rabbit newsletter was developed about five years ago but in recent years it was stopped. I would like to resurrect it again as a way to keep in touch with you all, particularly to pass on information about rabbit research and regional updates. I attend the Rabbit Coordination Group which is a Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) national partnership group. Other regional councils, research institutes and company stakeholders attend this meeting and give updates on their respective areas. The group meet a couple of times a year and so this newsletter would be a way to get those updates and information out to you. If you do not want to get this newsletter then just email me and I'll take you off the mail list (email address on the bottom of the page). Also if you would prefer this newsletter via email instead of mail, please email me and let me know.

I don't need to tell you that its been very dry this year so far and this can increase rabbit numbers, hopefully the virus will push through in Autumn to help reduce levels, but please where conditions allow, continue doing your control work to help keep those numbers low.

I look forward to meeting you this season and catching up with those I have already met.

Shona Sam

HOW THE CURRENT PROGRAMME IS RUN

Rabbit inspections are carried out from late summer through into early winter. This allows for the spring rabbit numbers to peak and allows time for them to be controlled with a combination of virus and shooting efforts. By late autumn the numbers of rabbits present are most likely to be the breeders through winter and will be responsible for the numbers coming into the next spring. High numbers at this time of the year (Autumn) indicate a build in population that may need attention.

Not all properties are visited in any one year and is dependent on the rabbit numbers found on the ground as we conduct nightcounts and start visiting different areas.

The rule under the current Regional Pest Management Strategy is that properties in the Upper Awatere must maintain levels of below the Modified Mclean Scale (MMS) 4, the rest of the region must maintain a level of MMS 3 (MMS is explained a bit more on the next page).

If high numbers are found on a property there are two options; wait for a season to see if virus/shooting efforts are able to lower the population or conduct a poisoning operation. If the rabbit population continues to remain high through to the next season a formal Notice of Direction will be sent out requiring that more comprehensive control be undertaken.

NIGHTCOUNT RESULTS 2014

Was a very quiet season last year, 12 out of the 13 rabbit nightcount tracks were conducted in the Upper Awatere and Coastal Ward and, on average, there were 1-1.6 rabbits per km found, the lowest were have seen since the nightcounts started in the 1980's. These results were fairly indicative of what I also saw through the properties that were visited; overall low numbers but with small hotspot pockets still holding stable numbers.

Deadly Rabbit! Any rabbits with no ears or 'deformed' ears means they have been challenged by the virus and are now immune. Picture taken Upper Awatere 2011.

RHD IMMUNITY RESULTS 2014

Because of the low numbers it was very difficult to obtain the minimum 30 rabbits from one site that was needed for the immunity testing (not a bad thing!). However we did manage to find some rabbits and sent them off to be aged and tested for RHD immunity. Aging results showed that 27 out of the 30 rabbits were over 2 years old. That tells us that there was a low juvenile recruitment that season. This was most likely due to a combination of good conditions that rabbits don't like for example the relatively moist summer we had 2013/14, good long pasture kept in most rabbit-prone areas, virus, etc.

RHD virus immunity showed that the population was sitting at 53%. Generally speaking, that means that about half of the adult population out there are immune to the virus. This raises the importance of ensuring that even at low numbers still continue to control, it is only if we can kept the immunity low that the virus will help in keeping the numbers low.

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UPDATE FROM RABBIT COORDINATION GROUP

Last meeting held 22 October 2014

Regional Updates

Otago: Report a busy rabbit season with rabbits on the increase, large litters were being born because of good grass pastures present for the lactating doe, and have approximately 200 properties under rabbit management. Of concern for them is the lack of liquid Pindone which is unable to be sourced and they are having to use 1080 with oats or pellets which they have not found as successful as carrots in Otago.

Canterbury: Are seeing an increase in some areas, one of those being the Kaikoura area. Interim results for this coming season have indicated a higher level of juvenile recruitment than in the past. Area of most concern for them is East McKenzie basin with consistently high rabbit levels. Last RHD immunity level tested had the immunity sitting at 64%. There have been some issues with sub-standard poisoning operations and are worried that may lead to more rabbit issues in the future.

DOC lands: DOC reported issues with tenure review lands coming to them with high rabbit numbers. The overall impression on DOC land in McKenzie Basin is that the virus has very little effect and land in Otago are back up to pre-RHD numbers. All of the Otago lands and most of McKenzie Basin lands are under rabbit management plans.

Research

There was a lot of discussion around alternatives to Pindone and 1080 for rabbit control. Zinc Phosphide toxin had been recently trialed however the phosphine gas that is given off makes any bait (carrot or pellet) unpalatable for rabbits. There is now a review to look at other potential toxins against a range of evaluation criteria.

There is ongoing work still looking at how we can make aerial operations as efficient as possible and trials are still being undertaken with strip sown versus broadacre methods.

Australia are currently going through the long complex process of obtaining a new Korean RHD virus and the group wants to be pro-active and ensure that the Korean virus can be available to NZ once it gets approved in Australia.

Janine Duckworth from Landcare Research has been working on finding a high-virulence strain of the RHD within NZ, she has now got a good sample of rabbits from throughout NZ and so far has seen quite a difference in the make-up of the virus from different areas. She is now moving through and testing these different strains in the lab. A student of hers is also looking at getting a better understanding of the non-lethal calicivirus that is present in NZ.

How we stacked up last season through the whole region

This scale gives a very general picture of how rabbits are sitting across the district. This is through council surveillance and general reports.

Keep in mind 'high' rabbits in North Marlborough can be deemed as 'low' in more rabbit prone Upper Awatere.

Green - Numbers low and steady.

Orange - Numbers potentially building, keep an eye on them.

Red - Numbers have built requiring serious control to bring levels down.

Coastal Ward	
Dashwood/Redwood Pass	
Medway	
Upper Awatere	
North Marlborough	
Avon Valley	
Wairau	

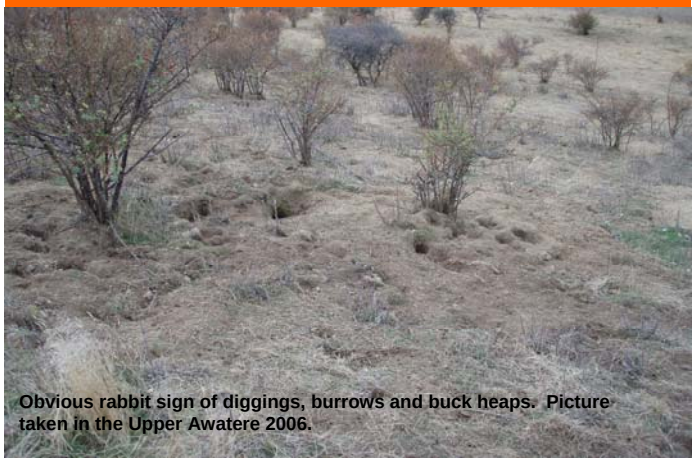
Keeping an Eye on Rabbit Sign

Council uses the Modified McLean Scale (MMS) to assess rabbit densities. This not only uses rabbits that you see but also ground sign such as pellet heaps, scratching and other sign. The three most common levels are outlined below:

Level 3 *- Odd rabbits seen; sign and some buck heaps showing up. Pellet heaps spaced 10 metres or more apart on average.*

Level 4 *- Pockets of rabbits; sign and fresh burrows very noticeable. Pellet heaps spaced between 5 metres and 10 metres apart on average.*

Level 5 *- Infestation spreading out from heavy pockets. Pellet heaps spaced 5 metres or less on average.*



Obvious rabbit sign of diggings, burrows and buck heaps. Picture taken in the Upper Awatere 2006.

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