



FROM THE EDITOR

A new strain of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease may be released in Marlborough in autumn 2017.

The Marlborough District Council, along with the Ministry for Primary Industries, Environment Canterbury and other district and regional councils, is seeking approval for the introduction of this Korean K5 virus throughout New Zealand.

If successful, we will be looking for landowner help with making sure the virus reaches as many rabbit populations as possible so there's maximum knockdown.

We expect the K5 strain to remove rabbits with immunity to a harmless form of rabbit calicivirus (RCA-A1), which can protect rabbits against the original Czech strain.

More good news is that night counts show Marlborough landholders are keeping on top of rabbit numbers, which remain low, including in the highly prone Upper Awatere and Molesworth Station areas.

Also underway is the review of the Regional Pest Management Strategy. A draft should be ready by December next year, then we will be asking for submissions.

Jim Herdman
Senior Biosecurity Officer



Biosecurity Officer Kurt Schollum who will also be working with the Rabbit Programme this year

VIRULENT KOREAN VIRUS RELEASE PLANNED FOR AUTUMN 2017

The New Zealand release of a new strain of virus could slash rabbit numbers by up to 40 per cent.

A Korean strain of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD) will be rolled out in Australia in autumn 2017, after thorough testing. An application has been made for a simultaneous New Zealand release.

New Zealand farmers illegally imported a Czech version of RHD virus in 1997, which at first had a 60-90 per cent kill rate. However, two sorts of immunity are developing. A growing number of young rabbits are surviving infection with the Czech strain and developing antibodies. Others are being infected with a harmless form of rabbit calicivirus (RCV-A1), which also protects them from the Czech RHD virus.

The greatest benefits from the virulent Korean K5 virus are expected where RCV-A1-exposed rabbit numbers are highest.

In Marlborough there are some moderately heavily infested sites in places, including Molesworth Station, the upper Awatere Valley and parts of the Wairau Valley, including vineyards.

Landcare Research rabbit biocontrol initiative leader, Janine Duckworth, said the K5 strain of the virus would control rabbits more cheaply and efficiently.

"We want to make sure that the K5 strain is released properly," says Dr Duckworth. "It's important that control agencies use a commercially-prepared product, free from any unwanted viruses. Timing and method of release must be managed to ensure the best possible rabbit control outcomes for farmers."

The new virus will not be a silver bullet for rabbits, with conventional control methods, including shooting, poisoning and dogs, still essential.



COUNCIL SEEKS LANDOWNER HELP WITH RABBIT VIRUS RELEASE

We are looking for groups of landowners willing to help with the release of virulent K5 rabbit virus.

The Marlborough District Council will oversee release of this K5 virus. Farmers can help by offering release sites, either general or monitored

At selected monitored sites, farmers must do a three-night spotlight count by vehicle and collect samples from 20 shot rabbits before the new virus is released. At general release sites, any form of rabbit count is acceptable and no shot samples are required.

Pre-feeding before and collecting dead rabbits after release will be required on

all sites and a repeat of counts four to six weeks later.

Existing groups can be used in this process, such as Landcare or farm discussion groups. A coordinator will be responsible for collating data and samples, and as a contact for the project team.

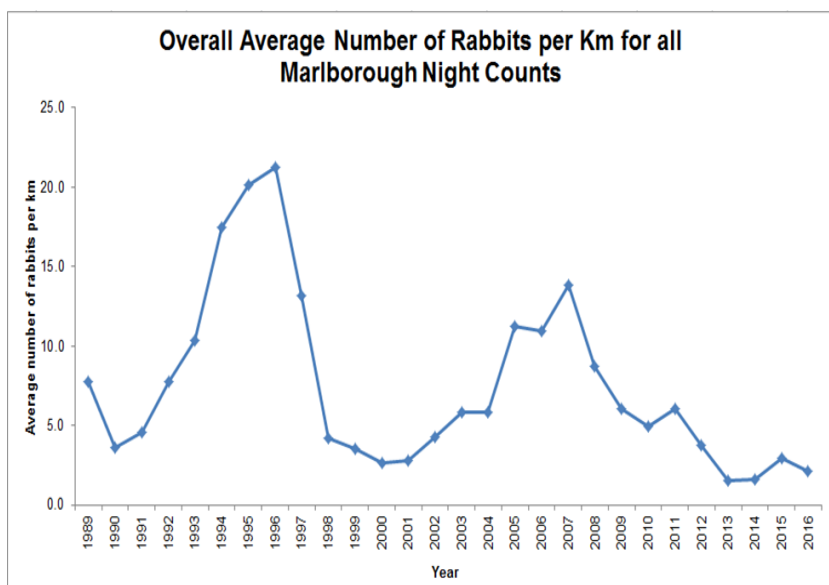
A vial of K5 virus, mixed with carrots or oats, will treat 150 hectares, but coverage will be much greater as the virus spreads to neighbouring rabbits. Each vial will cost about \$800-\$1000.

Expressions of interest close in late December and sites will be selected by mid-January 2017.

WANT TO HELP WITH K5 VIRUS RELEASE? CONTACT JIM HERDMAN (JIM.HERDMAN@MARLBOROUGH.GOV.T.NZ 03 520 7400) BY 30 DECEMBER



MARLBOROUGH RABBIT NUMBERS REACH NEW LOW



Marlborough rabbit numbers are at the lowest levels for 20 years.

Night counting in rabbit-prone areas by Marlborough District Council staff shows that numbers remain low and steady, even in the highly prone areas of the Upper Awatere and Molesworth Station.

Small pockets that need addressing are, however, being picked up by landowners and Council staff on properties with a long history of rabbits or high numbers in recent years.

Inspections were done from late summer through to early winter, allowing spring numbers to peak then be controlled by a combination of RHD virus infection and shooting.

Night count trend monitoring is carried out along 13 routes in the Upper Awatere/Molesworth, one at coastal Ward and one through Redwood Pass.

WHAT IS RHDV?

- Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease virus RHDV1 was illegally imported into New Zealand from Australia in 1997, by South Island farmers frustrated at Government's slow progress in agreeing to its release.
- The virus is fatal to European rabbits, which usually die within 6-36 hours of developing cold-like symptoms.
- There is no treatment or cure.
- The virus spreads by contact between rabbits, with carcasses, contaminated plants and soil, and faeces from rabbit predators like hawks, ferrets and cats. Insect vectors, such as blowflies, carry it over long distances.
- No other animal has been infected, even predators that eat infected rabbits.
- The welfare impact has been assessed as moderate, using an Australian Animal Welfare Strategy relative humaneness model.
- RHDV1 is one of a family of rabbit caliciviruses. Benign RCV-A1 strains, not lethal to rabbits, are found in New Zealand.
- The virulent RHDV1-K5 version is a Korean strain of RHDV1 already widespread in New Zealand.
- A vaccine to protect domestic rabbits from infection is available from vets.

Where high numbers are found landowners have two options, wait a season to see if virus plus shooting lowers populations, or poison. If numbers remain high the next season a Notice of Direction may be sent out requiring comprehensive control.

Council Biosecurity Officers are supporting research into increasing immunity to RHD and the development of new strains of this virus. Blood samples are taken from night-shot rabbits and serum extracted, to determine whether immunity levels are high.

Liver samples are sent to Landcare Research so virus present can be identified and placed on a "family tree" of strains which have developed since RHD's New Zealand introduction.



A rabbiters' camp on Molesworth Station

Rabbits were introduced into the Marlborough district about 1858 and in 1861 the Keene brothers of Swyncombe, Kaikoura, released a special breed of 'silver greys'. By 1882 rabbits had forced the Keene's off their property and were beginning to have an impact as far inland as Molesworth and Tardale.

William Acton-Adams of Molesworth introduced wagonloads of cats and also stoats and weasels, as well as dogs, poisoning and shooting in a hopeless attempt to halt the increase.



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