



FROM THE EDITOR

A new strain of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease will be released in Marlborough in March.

As part of a nationwide approach to combatting rabbits, it is expected the New Zealand release of the new strain of virus could reduce rabbit numbers by up to 40 percent.

We anticipate the new strain, called RHDV1 K5, will remove rabbits with immunity to a harmless form of rabbit calicivirus (RCA-A1) which can protect rabbits against the original Czech strain of RHD.

Biosecurity Officer Kurt Schollum will be organising the RHDV1 K5 release with landowners, coordinating the supply of treated carrot bait and assisting with advice.

Marlborough District Council also wants to hear your views on pest management in the region and is currently seeking public feedback on the Regional Pest Management Plan (RPMP). This plan sets out objectives for the next decade, or more, for specific programmes in Marlborough.

Be sure to have your say on both the contents of the RPMP proposal and the funding decisions which underpin it. Submissions on the RPMP Proposal close 5.00 pm Friday 23 March 2018.

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**RELEASE OF THE KOREAN VIRUS
(RHDV1 K5)**

After being rolled out in Australia in autumn last year, New Zealand farmers and land managers now have the opportunity to use the Korean strain of RHD.

The Czech strain of the RHD virus was released in 1997, and at first had a 60-90 percent kill rate. However two sorts of immunity have since developed and a growing number of young rabbits are now surviving and developing antibodies to the Czech strain. Others are being infected with a harmless form of rabbit calicivirus (RCV-A1), which also protects them from the original Czech RHD virus.

The new RHDV1 K5 strain of the virus is expected to control rabbits more cheaply and efficiently. The greatest benefits from the virulent RHDV K5 virus will likely occur where RCV-A1 exposed rabbit numbers are highest.

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

While having an effect, it's important to remember the new virus will not be the silver bullet for rabbit control, with the need to continue conventional control methods, including shooting and poisoning.



Rabbit damage

**LANDOWNERS ASSIST WITH RABBIT
VIRUS RELEASE**

Although a number of groups and landowners have offered to release the K5 rabbit virus, Council is still looking for more farmers or land managers to offer general release sites. The criteria for a general release is a population of over one hundred rabbits.

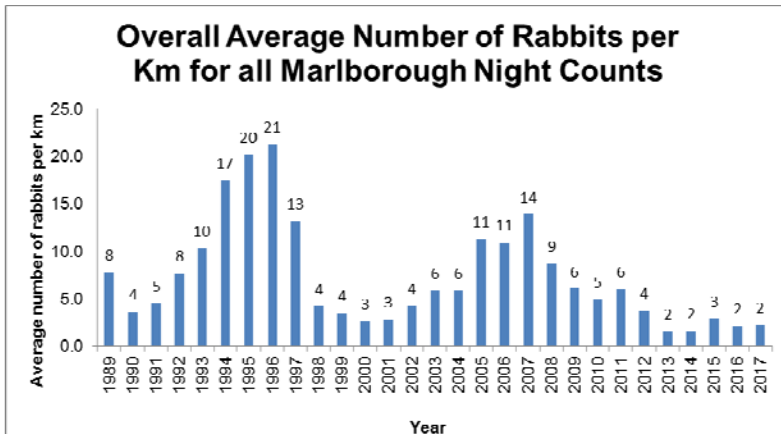
Two pre-feeds are required to ensure a high uptake of treated bait. The landowner will be responsible for the pre-feeds. The treated bait is to be laid out at the same target areas as the pre-feed.

At general release sites a pre and post assessment of rabbit numbers is requested, any form of rabbit count is

acceptable. After the release, farmers are asked to collect some liver samples from rabbits that are believed to have died from the virus so that Landcare Research can confirm which strain of RHDV is killing rabbits in your area.

A vial of RHDV1 K5 virus, mixed with carrots, will treat approximately 150 hectares, but coverage will be much greater as the virus spreads to neighbouring rabbits. In Marlborough the cost of the virus-treated carrot bait will be covered by the Council. The landowner will be responsible for obtaining and buying the pre-feed carrot and for laying out the pre-feed and treated carrot baits.

MARLBOROUGH RABBIT NUMBERS



The rabbit monitoring programme undertaken by Council Biosecurity staff has shown that rabbit numbers across the region are currently reasonably low. Biosecurity staff will be inspecting selected properties in March, April and May. The two methods used are night counts on predetermined routes and the day monitoring using the Modified McLean Scale. In the 2017 year no property recorded non-compliance with levels set using the Modified McLean Scale. Most of the night count routes also recorded low numbers. See graph.

WHAT IS RHDV?

- Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus RHDV1 was illegally bought into New Zealand from Australia in 1997, by South Island farmers frustrated at Government's slow progress in agreeing to its managed release.
- A newer, highly virulent strain of RHDV1 from Korea (RHDV1 K5) has been identified and released in Australia. The new virus can overcome the partial protection offered to rabbits that have been infected with a benign calicivirus RCV-A1.
- 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, and may be mechanically spread by rabbit predators like hawks, ferrets and cats. Insect vectors, such as blowflies, may carry it over long distances.
- No other animal can be infected, not even predators that eat infected rabbits can contract the virus.
- RHDV1 K5 is a restricted product and can only be obtained from participating regional councils and unitary authorities for application at selected release sites.
- A vaccine to protect domestic rabbits from infection is available from vets.

NZ HISTORY OF THE PESKY RABBIT

The European rabbit is thought to have been first introduced into New Zealand as a game animal in the 1830s. However it was in the dry grasslands of the South Island that they really found a niche.

They were introduced into the Marlborough district about 1858 and in 1861 the Keene Brothers of Swyncombe, Kaikōura, introduced a special breed of 'silver greys', unaware of the pestilence they had inflicted on themselves and their district.

Rabbits can increase in population tenfold in a single year and within ten years the Kaikōura, Wairau and Awatere runs were being seriously affected and there were concerns at their spread south.

By 1882 the rabbit had ruined the Keenes who were forced to leave Swyncombe, and was beginning to have an impact as far inland as Molesworth and Tardale. William Acton-Adams of Molesworth used every weapon at his

disposal including dogs, poisoning and shooting. He introduced wagonloads of cats purchased in Christchurch and also stoats and weasels in the hope that the release of these natural enemies would stop their increase.

Controlling the rabbit pest became a continuous operation providing work, sport, anguish, amusement, business and a high country farming challenge since the 1860s.

Since then the war on rabbits has continued with a variety of poisoning techniques and it currently remains the responsibility of the landowners to keep numbers in hand.

In 1997 RHDV rapidly spread through rabbit populations. RHDV had an initial dramatic effect in decimating rabbit numbers, but developing immunity has seen rabbit numbers in some arid parts of the South Island, including Molesworth, increase significantly again in recent years.



Stretched rabbit skins drying on a fence at a rabbiters camp