AWMS POSITION STATEMENT
Management of Feral Goats

Background

Goats were introduced into Australia nd New Zealand very early in European settlement and the feral descendants of these animals and from later liberations now occupy about 16% of Australia and 12% of New Zealand. Feral populations of goats remain on about 24 Australian islands and on about four New Zealand islands. Poorly restrained domestic goats remain a significant source of new feral populations when they escape or are abandoned.

The status of goats as feral or domestic is often unclear both legally and in practice. Domestic goats are those under some form of husbandry, i.e., they are owned, identified, restrained, managed for population structure and density and receive some level of animal welfare. However, some goats receive some of these management characteristics but are in all other respects indistinguishable from feral animals receiving no husbandry. For example, some feral goats are owned in the sense they go with the land and might be harvested, but are not restrained, identified and receive no welfare considerations. Note: a feral population is technically defined as a population of a species that has been domesticated that is now in a free-living state. Wild animals are those of species that have never been truly domesticated, such as deer.

Feral goats are recognised as pests by conservation agencies in both countries and government policies and management actions are set out in a National control Plan for New Zealand and a Threat Abatement Plan for Australia. Feral goats have been called “designer pests” because of the way our Neolithic ancestors changed their behaviour when they domesticated wild goats. They are very adaptable animals found from hot deserts to wet sub-Antarctic islands. Goats have high birth rates because the nannies can breed in their first year, they can produce twins and triplets, and can become pregnant while still lactating and so produce two litters within a year. Goats are as fussy as other animals with respect to their preferred foods, but can subsist on a wider range of plants than many other herbivores, and their social behaviour means they can reach very high local densities and cause severe local damage to the vegetation. Goats can survive without regular access to free water unless the habitat is very arid and hot – and even then they do not have to drink every day.

Feral goats are also recognised as pests by many government agencies responsible for primary production policies, largely because of their effects on the environment, their perceived competition with domestic livestock, and potential risks posed by diseases and parasites they share with livestock.

However, feral goats are also sometimes seen as a resource, particularly in the semi-arid rangelands of Australia. Here individual landowners can make money by selling feral goats they have mustered or trapped. Currently, about 1 million feral goats are harvested each year in Australia, killed at abattoirs and the meat exported. The income derived from this can be a significant proportion of landowners’ cash flow in years when the price of goats is high and the price of wool is low. When the opposite applies or during droughts, the same landowner can perceive goats as a pest.

Feral goats are also used to control weeds such as blackberry, St John's wort, sweet briar, and gorse. Generally, the animals have to be held at high densities to be effective so some level of husbandry – effective fencing at least – is required.

Based on the above, THE AUSTRALASIAN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT SOCIETY:

RECOGNISES that there are no legal impediments to controlling feral goats in Australia and New Zealand should government agencies and private landowners wish to do so. A national or State 'view' of goats may be imposed by legislation and prescribed management regimes paid for by taxes or rates, or by penalties on landowners who do not comply.

RECOGNISES there are few technical impediments to controlling feral goats in Australia and New Zealand. Humane and efficient control methods are available. That feral goats are not managed more widely is largely because of financial constraints on both government agencies and private landowners, and because some private landowners either see no benefit in controlling goats, or gain financially from their presence.

ACKNOWLEDGES that management goals for feral goats are often set at an individual property level, and this complicates any regional or national management strategies for feral goats, either as pests or as resources.

ACKNOWLEDGES that in both Australia and New Zealand many insular and some mainland feral goat populations have been eradicated and RECOGNISES that the cost to remove the last goats is often very expensive and therefore must be justified in terms of the benefits expected relative to the benefits.

NOTES that where eradication is not possible, both government agencies and individual landowners have found it difficult to sustain pest control as their budgets or priorities change. Feral goat populations may be eradicated only where all goats can be placed at risk and removed at a rate faster than they can replace their losses at all densities, and where the risk of re-colonisation is zero.

RECOGNISES that the commercial harvesting of feral goats offers an efficient method to reduce goat densities in Australia, however, its use as a sustained control technique for pest control depends of the harvesters' goals in regards to population reduction.

RECOGNISES that where goats are managed as pests, managers must set target densities (and therefore target culls or harvests) at which the impact of the goat is removed or ameliorated.

Accordingly, AWMS recommends that:

1. Unmanaged feral goats are seen as unwanted pests.
2. Where landholders consider feral goats to be resource, the goat should be seen as livestock and landowners must take responsibility for their management and its

consequences. The rules for managing livestock, such as maximum stocking rates, should apply, and adverse effects on neighbours should be eliminated.

3. Where most or all land managers consider goats to be pests over a wide area and control is deemed necessary, an agreed strategy must be put in place if control is to be sustained. Such as strategy must consider:
    - The scale of the problem and the scale of the control response possible. If the two don't match, a system of prioritisation is essential,
    - Equitable sharing of the costs according to the degree of benefits,
    - The constructive use f legislation, extension programs ad positive incentives to support the concerted control action
    - A monitoring scheme to measure success or failure and a reporting process to change management actions if appropriate.
4. If the rules for eradication can be met and if the benefits of eradication outweigh the costs, then eradication should be attempted. If the rules cannot be met, then the intent to achieve the impossible can be counter-productive and will certainly include opportunity costs.
5. Government agencies should control goats on land they administer, with priorities being set if funds are limited. They should also take a lead role in coordinating feral goat control in surrounding land and in areas of high priority where the public good would be served.

Governments in both Australia and New Zealand should also take a lead role in funding priority research on goat control. AWMS sees these priorities as being:

- Identification of appropriate target densities and methods to measure their achievement for sustained control operations on feral goats in a range of priority conservation habitats.
- Assessment of the different management goals with respect to feral goat management of landowners, particularly in the pastoral rangelands of Australia, and the consequences of these goats on residual goat densities and impacts.
- The potential of water management as a control tool for goats in the semi-rid and arid rangeland of Australia.
- Cost-effective methods of eradicating newly-established, small, and isolated populations of feral goats – where this is strategically possible and justified.
- Identification of the changing optimal densities of goats to effectively control weeds without competing with domestic stock or adversely affecting biodiversity values.
- Review and audit of the underpinning legislation, planning systems, and current implementation of major goat control strategies in Australia and New Zealand.
