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**Committee** Rural Services and Wairarapa  
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## Future Possum Control in the Wellington Region

### 1. Purpose

To initiate consideration of possible options for maintaining control of possums and other predators within the Wellington region following the withdrawal of field services under the National Pest Management Strategy for Bovine Tb

### 2. Significance of the decision

The matters in this report do not trigger the significance policy of the Council or otherwise trigger section 76(3)(b) of the Local Government Act 2002.

### 3. Background

Greater Wellington's current Long Term Council Community Plan has a target of having 80% of the region under intensive possum control by 2013. At present, about 78.4% is subject to possum control programmes and the very large proportion of this occurs through the Bovine Tb vector control activity.

The Wellington Regional Animal Health Advisory Committee, acting as the Animal Health Board's representative in the Wellington region, have agreed that its major objective is to have a maximum total of six Tb infected cattle and or deer herds by 2012/13. In the shorter term the Committee has three objectives approved by the Animal Health Board:

- To 'roll back' the Declared Movement Controlled Area (DCMA) into the Bideford, Whangaehu and Mt Bruce Waipoua areas during the period 2004 to 2007;
- To confirm freedom of vector related infection in the Hastwell section of Whangaehu Mauriceville, the Wellington section of the Mt Bruce Reserve, the northern section of Mt Bruce Waipoua , East Alfredton and Castlehill areas by 30 June 2008;
- To commence confirmation of freedom of vector related infection in the Central and Wellington Kapiti Tb Management Areas (TMAs) during 2006/07 or 2007/08.

The first two bullet points refer to areas on or near the northern regional boundary in the Wairarapa. It is these areas where possum and ferret control for Tb purposes will stop first, possibly as early as the 2008/09 year. Other areas, including the remaining sections of Mt Bruce – Waipoua, and parts of Bideford and Whangaehu will follow in 2009/10.

Greater Wellington will need to consider whether it wishes to support on-going possum / predator control in these areas in the future and what type of support options are available to it. If Council wishes to remain involved then decisions made for northern Wairarapa will create a precedent for the rest of the region that is currently included within the Bovine Tb vector control programme. Possible options are discussed later in this report.

It should be noted that MAF Biosecurity NZ are preparing a paper on issues concerning post Bovine Tb possum control in New Zealand. All regional councils, via the Biosecurity Managers Group, are involved in the investigative process. This paper is expected to be presented to the Central Government & Regional Council Biosecurity Forum before year end.

#### **4. Benefits of Bovine Tb Vector Control**

The National Tb Strategy has two principal benefits:

- Avoiding trade risks; and
- Environmental benefits from controlling possums and ferrets.

There are also human health benefits and on-farm production benefits.

Clearly, the risk to trading of New Zealand dairy, deer and beef products is the key driver for the Strategy. Arguably, these risks will still apply despite parts of New Zealand being declared Tb free. That is, our trading partners will still consider that there are product contamination risks no matter where the products have come from.

At a regional level, Tb vector control provides major economic benefits to landowners and occupiers who farm cattle and deer. As the number of infected herds decreases, it will become more difficult for properties with infected herds to remain economically viable.

The Animal Health Board have recently initiated research on the environmental benefits of possum and predator control completed under the Tb Strategy. Whilst this research has focused on the benefits to the Crowns Estate, the key findings can be extrapolated onto private land. The results of this research are not yet available but are expected within two months.

Scientific evidence from our Key Native Ecosystem monitoring programme indicates that the extent of benefit can be greatly influenced by the type of control methods used, the frequency of control and the residual trap catch levels achieved. Some toxins, such as 1080 and brodifacoum, will also impact on rodents and

mustelids, thereby increasing the potential for birds, insects, lizards and other fauna to successfully multiply. Removing possums improves the fruiting and flowering of trees, thereby increasing the populations of native birds as more food is available at critical nesting times.

Anecdotal evidence from landowners and the general public supports the findings of our KNE monitoring programme, and work undertaken by the Parks & Forests Department on Greater Wellington land.

## **5. Justification for Ongoing Possum Control**

There are two main reasons for landowners to continue to support possum control – insurance against the risk of bovine Tb infection; and continuing enhancement of indigenous biodiversity. The Tb risk raises a valid argument for some form of ongoing contribution by the Animal Health Board and the Crown. The latter currently funds 50% of all vector control costs in NZ, totalling approximately \$27M per year.

The decision for Greater Wellington is whether we remain involved longer term and, if so, what form and / or level of involvement.

## **6. Greater Wellington Involvement**

Four possible options have been considered.

### *(i) Education and advice*

This option requires interested landowners to undertake their own control. Greater Wellington could assist by developing management plans and educational material for guidance. This option would require all landowners who wish to use toxins to become Approved Handlers under the HASNO Act. Greater Wellington could continue to support research into appropriate possum bio-control options.

This option is likely to result in spasmodic efforts, causing an eventual rise in possum and predator numbers and loss of current biodiversity gains. Future Tb outbreaks could not be ruled out.

### *(ii) Community Schemes – Option 1*

A number of community schemes were in existence prior to expansion of the Bovine Tb vector control programme in the mid 1990's. The successful schemes were usually driven by one or two landowners who had major concerns about farming with Tb infection (e.g. stud farmers). Greater Wellington's involvement was to organise contracts and audit performance. These schemes pre-dated the Residual Trap Catch (RTC) monitoring method so contractors were paid by landowners directly, based on hours worked.

All the community schemes were wound up when the affected areas became part of the Tb vector control programme.

Community schemes are likely to be more successful overall if they are managed by Greater Wellington, possibly with assistance from landowner

committees. A targeted scheme-type rate could be applied to collect funds. Greater Wellington would need to determine what level of funding assistance was appropriate from the region, and whether other parties (e.g. the Crown and Animal Health Board) could also contribute. Work could be undertaken by either Greater Wellington staff or using contractors.

(iii) *Community Schemes – Option 2*

This option would provide for an initial knockdown of possums and other predators to low levels before passing the responsibility back to landowners. To insure its investment, Greater Wellington would need to have powers to enforce control by all landowners. Greater Wellington could provide subsidised bait and equipment to assist landowners. A rate may still be required to assist with funding of Greater Wellington costs. Contributions from other parties could also be sought.

Variations of this option are utilised by Hawkes Bay RC and Taranaki RC.

(iv) *Greater Wellington Managed Control*

This option is effectively an extension of the existing vector control programme. However, the programme could sit under the Regional Pest Management Strategy in terms of the legislative basis for action.

Greater Wellington would set the control targets (based on maximising biodiversity benefits and minimising Tb risks) and utilise RTC monitoring to determine when control was undertaken and if it was successful. Control could be undertaken under a tendered system or Greater Wellington could decide to utilise its own staff.

Monitoring would be a significant cost component of this option unless it was decided to use input contracts and monitor performance by other means (e.g. wax tag monitoring). Trend monitoring using RTC would still be necessary.

A landowner rate would be likely, supported by other parties who benefit from the scheme.

It is expected that control would only be required approximately every three years. A target RTC of 5% is considered appropriate with a trigger level of 7 to 8% RTC. Lower target levels could be applied to areas of key ecological significance or where landowners were prepared to pay additional costs.

## **7. Who Does the Control?**

If Greater Wellington determines that an ongoing management role would maximise returns to ratepayers and the environment, then a decision on who does the field work will need to be made in the future.

The writer has some serious concerns about the appropriateness of the current Animal Health Board fully contestable contracting model for use in future possum control schemes. Whilst registrations for vector control work are on a par with previous years, the number of tenderers has fallen significantly recently. The

majority of contractors are now seeking to secure work near their home bases to reduce expenses. We are also witnessing the evolution of a limited number of dominant contractors in parts of NZ. This could lead to smaller, family based contractors being 'squeezed out' if pricing wars eventuate. The contracting scene in a few years time could be dominated by a small number of large contractors. Cartels and monopoly supply situations are possible if this eventuates.

Greater Wellington could opt to persevere with the contestable model or determine that control by local contractors and / or Council staff is necessary to ensure quality services are maintained at reasonable prices. However, if Greater Wellington seeks funding assistance from the Crown and / or the Animal Health Board, then these agencies would expect to have some input in how the services were provided.

## **8. Funding**

The funding of any future proposal to maintain possum control must be considered a 'collective responsibility' between landowners, Greater Wellington, and any other beneficiaries. In this case other beneficiaries include the Animal Health Board, the Crown and the general public.

The Animal Health Board should contribute as future possum control reduces the risk of Tb re-infecting the regions cattle and deer herds. The Crown currently contributes significant funds towards the Tb National Pest Management Strategy as an exacerbator i.e. as the owner of large tracts of habitat land. However, it could equally be argued that the Crown is also a beneficiary; as a landowner receiving border protection, and from increased tax wealth generated by improved production and exports.

As the level of Tb infection declines in NZ, it is anticipated that funds currently paid to the Animal Health Board by industry contributors and the Crown would also decline. For cattle farmers, the slaughter levy is the main contributory method. Deer and dairy industries make direct contributions. An opportunity exists to utilise some of these funds to initiate and maintain regional possum control schemes. Discussions with the farming community and contributing industries are, therefore, essential to raise awareness and determine interest and involvement.

The general public benefit from increased exposure to enhanced biodiversity, and from the flow-on effects of increased agricultural production in the region.

Current (2004/05) costs of vector control, monitoring, and management in this region are approximately \$4.5M for 335,000ha. However, this cost is based on achieving very low RTC residuals and extensive monitoring. Inputs of this intensity would not be required in a future control programme if the objectives were to maintain biodiversity gains and maintain zero Tb benefits.

Preliminary estimates of maintaining a three year rotating possum and predator control programme are about \$2.5M per annum. This is based on completing the entire area currently under Bovine Tb vector control. Initial costs would be much lower, commencing at approximately \$200,000 in 2008/09, increasing to \$240,000 in 2009/10. Costs would steadily increase as more land in the region

was declared 'Tb free'. The speed of the transfer should relate to the need to prevent any further Tb herd breakdowns in the northern and central Wairarapa.

## 9. Landowner Survey

A successful 'post Tb' possum and predator control scheme will only be successful if it is supported from the outset by landowners. Their commitment to making financial contributions, undertaking their own work, allowing contractor access, and permitting various control methods on their land needs to be secured in advance.

It is suggested that Greater Wellington commences a survey of landowners in the northern and central Wairarapa to determine whether they would support a future possum and predator control scheme. The survey should provide background information, including an outline of management options. Important details to gather include-

- Opinions on ongoing Greater Wellington management;
- willingness to fund and preferred methods of funding.

## 10. Recommendations

*That the Committee:*

1. *Receives the report.*
2. *Notes the content of the report.*
3. *Considers the options for future management of possums and other predators currently managed under the National Tb Strategy.*
4. *Determines a preferred option for further investigation.*
5. *Approves a survey of the farming community to determine views on future management options.*
6. *Agrees to commence discussions with the Animal Health Board, industry groups, and the Crown regarding funding of future possum and predator control in the Wellington Region, following the gradual withdrawal of services under the National Tb Strategy.*

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