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Committee Catchment Management
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The Future of Possum and other Predator Control in the Wellington Region

1. Purpose

To seek the Committee's guidance on the future strategic direction for the control of possums and other predators within the Wellington region

2. Significance of the decision

The matters for decision 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

There are two events planned for the Wellington region that will impact significantly on the future control of possums and other predators. The first is the planned rollback of the Animal Health Board's (AHB) Bovine Tb vector control programme from our northern regional boundary, and secondly, the release of the Proposed Regional Pest Management Strategy (RPMS) in March for public submission.

The AHB vector control programme is planned to reduce in area from 2009. An initial area of approximately 20,000ha will be declared Tb free resulting in all vector control services ceasing in that area. The Tb free area will increase by a further 80,000 ha in 2011, expanding annually thereafter.

The Proposed RPMS includes reference to the reducing AHB programme and provides two possible objectives for the ongoing management of possums in the region:

- To minimise the adverse environmental impact of possums in Key Native Ecosystems and other areas of ecological significance in the region;
- To address the adverse impacts of possums in selected areas for catchment functions, biodiversity and economic prosperity.

The Key Native Ecosystem (KNE) programme is currently under review. This process is due for completion by July 2008. The review will determine if the current method of site selection, control options, and funding is still appropriate.

KNE sites are under-represented in the Wairarapa. This reflects that the Bovine Tb vector control programme covers the entire Wairarapa and provides a good base level of predator control to protect most significant ecosystems. However, with the pending cessation of the Bovine Tb vector control programme, more intensive predator control under an expanded KNE programme is possibly required.

The second objective identified above provides an option for rollback areas to be included in a new programme, with a focus on priority catchment functions, and maintenance of current biodiversity and economic gains accrued via the AHB programme. This objective could also encapsulate those areas in the region that have received no control under either the AHB or KNE programmes i.e. large areas of the western part of the region.

4. Why Undertake Future Possum & Predator Control?

Under the current LTCCP, Greater Wellington has stated that it wishes to promote healthy environments where well functioning and diverse ecosystems meet our current and future needs. Healthy ecosystems also contribute to our sense of place, providing pride in our unique landscapes. Pest management is a fundamental cornerstone to enable ecosystems to recover and prosper, and to enhance regional biodiversity.

Greater Wellington's biodiversity role is about the management of the region's ecosystems in order to protect their life-supporting characteristics, their component plants and animals, and the ecosystem services they provide.

Greater Wellington has a history of innovative thinking in respect of biodiversity. The underpinning philosophy of the Ecosystems chapter of the Regional Policy Statement, which became operative in 1995, was the need to manage the regions' ecosystems as functioning systems and for their own intrinsic values. This approach predated the 2003 amendment to the Resource Management Act 1991 which placed responsibility for the "establishment, implementation, and review of objectives, policies and methods for maintaining indigenous biodiversity", including "the intrinsic values of ecosystems" with regional councils.

If landowners, ratepayers and Greater Wellington wish to maintain the biodiversity, economic and social gains provided by the AHB programme, then it is necessary to avoid delays in developing and implementing an alternative programme. Delays will result in a quick resurgence of possum / predator numbers with the consequence that control costs will be much higher. Two recent examples of how quickly possum densities increase include –

- Stronvar MR3 (5,700ha) – the RTC increased from 2.2% on January 2006 to 12.3% in January 2007. This stratum, along with neighbouring areas, has received control for many years;
- Haurangi Crown (5,660ha) – the RTC has increased from 7.5% in December 2006 to 12.4% in January 2008. The latter had an individual line of 34%, i.e. 11 possums caught over three nights.

Secondly, the AHB and KNE programmes have identified that there are significant biodiversity benefits available if regular, sustained control is implemented. Gains include native plant regeneration, increased flowering, improved bird and insect life, reduced disease in the wildlife, and improved water quality through reduced erosion. The AHB programme has been of considerable value to Greater Wellington's land management activities as soil conservation investments have been protected from predation.

Based on surveys completed in the Waikato and Manawatu / Wanganui regions, there is likely to be a high level of support from farmers for the continuation of some possum / predator control programme. Recent discussions at the Wairarapa Hill Country Advisory Committee confirm this. Support in the northern regions of New Zealand has been driven by concerns about the possible resurgence of Bovine Tb. Maintaining biodiversity gains have also featured prominently.

Whilst scientific studies indicate that Bovine Tb has been eradicated from the wildlife in these areas, there is still a risk that Tb could be reintroduced by the illegal liberation of infected feral pigs and deer. Keeping possum and ferret numbers low reduces the risk of disease transfer.

5. Options for Control

(1) The first option for consideration could be summarised as 'do nothing'. Under this option landowners in the Tb rollback area would be left to undertake control as they see fit, with little or no assistance from Greater Wellington. The likely outcome of this option would be spasmodic and inconsistent control undertaken by landowners. There would be different levels of motivation by landowners resulting in biodiversity and economic gains being eroded reasonably quickly. There would be no expansion of the KNE programme in these areas.

(2) The second option involves the identification of new KNE sites in the rollback areas, using existing prioritisation methods. Greater Wellington would be responsible for possum / predator control whilst the landowner commitment includes covenanting, fencing and maintenance. Control work outside of the KNE would be the responsibility of landowners with minimal assistance from Greater Wellington.

The advantage of this option is that the main remnant ecological sites would be identified and protected. However, surrounding areas would quickly revert to high possum/predator densities depending on the motivational levels of

affected landowners. Greater Wellington could introduce subsidies for bait and equipment as an incentive if this was the favoured option.

(3) The third option involves some subsidisation of bait and equipment by Greater Wellington and advice on individual control programmes for landowners. Whilst this would be an improvement on option one, there is no guarantee that landowners would rigorously follow any control plan. Historical associations with self help groups in the 1990's supports this concern. This option would likely only result in a slowing down of the erosion of the current gains.

(4) Option four involves a greater level of input by Greater Wellington with individual control plans being developed, and landowners agreeing to meet minimum performance standards. Greater Wellington would kickstart the programme by lowering the possum residual trap catch (RTC) to <3%. Landowners would be required to maintain the levels to 5% RTC or less on an annual basis. Bait and equipment would be subsidised by Greater Wellington. This is a similar model to that used in Taranaki. Whilst it has permitted an expansion of the area under control, it has also necessitated considerable enforcement action by Taranaki Regional Council (TRC) to force landowners to comply. Relationships have consequently suffered.

This option also introduces performance targets which necessitates regular monitoring by independent parties. This would add considerably to the cost.

(5) Option five involves the formation of local advisory committees made up of landowners and Greater Wellington representatives. These committees would agree on specific targets for landowners to meet. Peer pressure would be used in the first instance to gain compliance. Enforcement by Greater Wellington would be the final action where necessary. This option would also have an initial operation undertaken by Greater Wellington to achieve a 3% RTC before handing over to landowners. Subsidisation of bait and equipment by Greater Wellington would be included.

The committees could decide that contractors would be used to maintain the required RTC levels rather than individual landowners. This option is similar to the Hawkes Bay RC model that is currently managed outside the boundaries of the Tb control programme.

(6) Option six provides for Greater Wellington to manage the entire programme, with local input provided via advisory committees. Greater Wellington would determine the RTC targets based on scientific studies. Control work would only be undertaken when RTC thresholds had been passed. Control would be undertaken in-house or contracted.

(7) Option seven includes option six but with an additional focus on new KNE sites where Greater Wellington would undertake more intensive predator control. The landowner commitments outlined in option two would be a prerequisite for Greater Wellington involvement.

Option seven is the optimal option for maintaining social, economic and biodiversity gains of the Tb programme. This option also supports the Greater Wellington objective of protecting and enhancing biodiversity throughout the region with particular focus on threatened ecosystems.

6. The Total Catchment Management Concept

Any future possum/predator control programme needs to consider the Greater Wellington vision of Total Catchment Management (TCM). Maintaining the social, economic and biodiversity gains of the Tb control programme can be an important step towards implementing the TCM concept. Integration of a 'life after Tb' programme with other Greater Wellington functions (e.g. land management, riparian management, and water quality management) could be used as part of a process to establish a prioritisation system to identify where resources are best invested. The model of using advisory committees would assist in identifying community priorities and gaining feedback on implementation issues.

7. Funding

The current Bovine Tb vector control programme requires a regional share of between 10-12% of the total programme cost i.e. approximately \$650,000 annually. This is apportioned to the general rate (60%) and a specific works and services rate (40%). The latter is funded by landowners with rateable property sizes exceeding 10ha within the programme area. Over the last five years the rate has been maintained at \$0.30/ha, supplemented by contributions from the Tb rate reserve fund. The reserve fund currently totals approximately \$500,000. It has grown from operational savings made since the Tb rate was introduced in the mid -1990's.

Legal advice will need to be sought to determine whether the reserve can be used to assist funding of a new possum / predator control programme. Consultation with affected ratepayers will also be required.

The Council has indicated that its contribution to the Tb vector control programme will cease when it is no longer involved in the Vector Management role. Current indications are that this will be 1 July 2009. Approximately \$350-400,000 of general rates will become available if it was agreed that Greater Wellington will cease funding of the Tb vector programme.

A new possum/predator control programme will need additional funding from landowners (i.e. over and above the \$0.30 / ha they currently contribute to the Tb vector control work). A review of funding options (targeted rates based on capital value, land value, or land area) will need to occur once the Council has confirmed a preferred option and landowners have been consulted.

Similar programmes operating in northern regions are funded by a range of mechanisms –

Waikato – Environment Waikato introduced a targeted rate of \$7 per \$100,000 CV for the 2007/08 year around the slogan of ‘maintain the gains’ following the cessation of Tb vector control across large areas of Waikato;

Manawatu – Wanganui – Horizons RC introduced a specific targeted rate to fund 40% of their costs for their new possum control programme for the 2007/08 year. The remaining 60% is funded by general rate. The targeted rate is based on CV and applies across all rateable properties;

Taranaki – TRC have operated the Ring Plain possum control programme (225,000ha) for many years. TRC undertakes initial control works, subsidises bait and equipment, undertakes monitoring and audits, and completes reporting processes. All of the TRC costs are funded via general rate. Landowners fund the control work;

Hawkes Bay – Hawkes Bay Regional Council (HBRC) manage a large possum control programme (400,000ha) in conjunction with landowners. This area is expanding as Tb control areas are rolled back. HBRC fund initial control and landowners are expected to maintain densities to below 5% RTC. HBRC provide a 50% subsidy on materials, undertake monitoring and audits, and complete reporting processes. The HBRC costs are funded 30% by general rate and 70% by a targeted rate.

8. Delivery Options

The various options provided in section 5 above outline a number of possible options for the delivery of control. These range from landowner control only to total management by Greater Wellington.

The recent decision by the AHB to centralise Vector Management services could have a significant influence on how future Greater Wellington services are provided.

BioWorks is currently a major supplier of possum / predator control services to the AHB. However, they could also play an important role in a new control programme in the rollback areas, depending on the option preferred by Greater Wellington.

There are also staff within the VM team who have unique management and industry skills that could assist in the development and implementation of a new control programme.

Greater Wellington needs to consider how these industry skills could be harnessed to maximise the benefits of a new programme.

9. Recommendations

That the Committee:

1. ***Receives*** the report.
2. ***Identifies*** a preferred option or options for the management of possums and other predators in areas proposed to be removed from the Bovine Tb vector control programme, and in other areas of the region where control programmes do not currently exist;
3. ***Requests*** staff to report back to the July 2008 Committee meeting on the costs, benefits and funding options of the preferred option or options.
4. ***Approves*** the commencement of a consultation programme with affected landowners to determine community objectives and support for a new control programme.

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Attachment 1: