



Report 08.518
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Committee Catchment Management
Author Wayne O'Donnell, Manager, Biosecurity

Maintaining the Gains - The Future of Possum / Predator Control

1. Purpose

To update the Committee on the outcome of recent landowner consultation and to further develop a preferred option for future public consultation.

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

Report 08.137 to the March Committee meeting highlighted two significant events that impact on Greater Wellington's potential future role in pest management. The first was the proposed cessation of Bovine Tb vector control operations adjacent to the northern boundaries of the region. The second was the review of the Regional Pest Management Strategy and the opportunity this presented for initiating a new regional possum/predator control programme.

Report 08.137 indicated that approximately 20,000ha will be declared Tb free in 2009 and a further 60,000ha added in 2011. The total Tb free area is expected to expand annually thereafter.

Seven future control options were presented to the Committee in March. They ranged from no future GW input to a GW led possum / predator control programme that also included an enhanced biodiversity focus through an expanded Key Native Ecosystem (KNE) programme. The Committee agreed that consultation with affected landowners be initiated based around options 5, 6 and 7.

4. Landowner Consultation

A survey form was developed by Biosecurity and Communications Department staff in April / May. Details of the proposed Tb vector control rollback were provided by the Animal Health Board. Information concerning options 5, 6 and 7 were included. Landowners were asked to indicate a preference and provide suggestions regarding funding options. The forms had a prepaid return address to Greater Wellington.

The forms were posted directly to approximately 600 landowners in northern Wairarapa and Otaki, using the GW rating database to accurately identify recipients. Landowners were given over one month to return the forms or to indicate their preference by email response.

A number of additional strategies were initiated to ensure landowners were aware of the survey. These included a press release by the Wairarapa Hill Country Advisory Committee which was published in four local newspapers; an email distributed by the President of Wairarapa Federated Farmers; and numerous phone calls made by a prominent Wairarapa farmer to affected landowners.

Eighty-six responses (14%) were received by 30 June. Of this total, 90% indicated that they supported a GW organised and led control programme to be initiated in 2009. Sixty-two percent of respondents indicated a preference for option 7 i.e. general possum / predator control plus extension of the KNE programme.

Whilst only a small number requested a meeting to discuss the matter further, it is recommended that a series of meetings should be organised in the affected areas to further explain the proposal and to gain feedback on funding options.

5. Control Options

Option 5 was supported by only 7% of respondents. Therefore, it is not appropriate to consider this option further.

Option 6 was supported by 28% of respondents. This option entails GW management of the programme with local input via community advisory committees. A general possum / predator control programme would be initiated when specific Residual Trap Catch (RTC) thresholds have been exceeded.

Option 7 (62% support) incorporated Option 6 plus an additional focus on new KNE sites in the affected areas. The identification of potential KNE sites is yet to be undertaken. However, it is expected that this part of the programme would initially be only a small component of total expenditure given the prerequisite criteria that landowners would need to meet before achieving KNE status.

In addition to the above options, Report 08.137 recommended that control be undertaken in areas west of the Tararua / Rimutaka Ranges that have received no control under either the Bovine Tb or KNE programmes. The proposal

includes approximately 20,000ha of new work per annum over a three year period before phasing in regular maintenance work.

6. Costs

Option 6 costs for the first six year period are outlined below:

| 2009/10 | 2010/11 | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 | 2014/15 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| \$1.03M | \$1.07M | \$1.60M | \$1.12M | 1.8M | \$1.84M |

These totals are based on the current predictions for cessation of Bovine Tb vector control operations in the northern parts of the region. Whilst the rollback is expected to steadily increase, the total cost will be maintained at \$2.5M or less to ensure there is sufficient contractor capacity to complete all field work.

Option 7 costs include an expanded KNE programme. As the rollback area increases, the number of new KNE sites is also expected to increase. However, it is estimated that this expansion will only add a maximum of 9% to the Option 6 costs, as follows:

| 2009/10 | 2010/11 | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 | 2014/15 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| \$1.10M | \$1.14M | \$1.70M | \$1.21M | \$1.94M | \$2.0M |

7. Identifying Beneficiaries & Exacerbators

Funding options for the proposed programme should follow the identification of both beneficiaries and exacerbators.

Option 6 includes a general possum / predator control programme where pest densities are maintained at low levels so as to “maintain the gains” provided by the Bovine Tb vector control programme over many years. These gains include a mix of:

- economic – reduced losses associated with Tb infected cattle and deer; reduced costs associated with stock mustering for stock Tb testing; increased pasture and crop productivity; improved soil and production benefits as pest impacts on both conservation and forestry plantings are reduced.
- biodiversity – enhanced native plant regeneration; increased flowering leading to improved bird and insect diversity; reduced predation on native flora and fauna, reduced disease in wildlife, improved soil and water quality.
- social – reduced stigma associated with having an infected herd status; enhanced wellbeing and pride in having improved biodiversity in a unique landscape; sense of achievement about doing something positive for the environment; improved community wellbeing.

The benefits described above highlight that the beneficiaries of a new possum / predator control programme include both landowners and the wider regional community. There is justification for landowners to pay a share as they gain a direct economic benefit from reduced pest densities on their land. They also own or occupy the land that harbours these pests so are the main exacerbators. However, negative impacts will vary across the farming community as many owners will also be undertaking their own pest control at their cost.

The Crown is identified as an exacerbator where land proposed for control abuts Department of Conservation land or land managed by other Crown agencies. Arguably the Crown is also an exacerbator as a result of poor historical biosecurity decisions which allowed these pests into NZ.

The Crown is a major contributor (50% of vector control costs) to the Bovine Tb Strategy on the basis that Crown land is a major source of possums. The same argument should apply to the Maintain the Gains proposal. The Crown is also a beneficiary on behalf of the nation with regards recovery and enhancement of rare and threatened ecosystems.

Benefits to the regional community come from enhanced agricultural production where economic gains impact firstly on local communities, then flow onto larger urban communities. Regional benefits also accrue from improved soil conservation reducing river sediment loads and the potential impact on regional infrastructure. Enhanced water quality is also a significant regional benefit.

However, the largest regional (and potentially national) benefits will be derived from enhanced biodiversity on private land. Private land includes many examples of the most threatened ecosystems, such as wetlands, native riparian margins and lowland forest remnants.

It could be argued that the Animal Health Board would also be a direct beneficiary of a new possum/predator control programme. Low possum/ferret densities reduce the risk of Bovine Tb re-infestation in the future. This risk remains as long as feral pigs and deer continue to be illegally released in the region. A new possum / predator programme may, therefore, negate the need for any future Bovine Tb vector control.

8. Funding Options

The analysis summarised above indicates that the beneficiaries from a new possum/predator control programme include:

- Landowners
- Local and regional communities
- The Crown

Regional Council investigations to date have indicated that the Crown is unwilling to assist funding post Tb regional possum/predator control. Recently the Crown announced a further \$3.3M to DoC to assist the Department to meet its obligations as a 'good neighbour' under RPMSs'. However, this fund is

completely inadequate to provide regular possum / predator control operations on land adjacent to Tb rollback areas. This situation will become worse as the rollback area increases throughout NZ in the future.

Precedent for funding possum / predator control in the region is provided by the current Bovine Tb programme where landowners are paying 40% of the regional share by way of a land area rate applied to all properties within the programme exceeding 10 hectares. The remaining 60% share is funded by the General Rate. The GW revenue and funding policy for the Bovine Tb programme states that “a regional contribution is considered appropriate as there are regional and national ecological benefits from protection of regional flora and fauna”. Surprisingly, the policy does not refer to regional economic benefits as a further justification for a regional contribution.

A Maintain the Gains programme will provide more benefit to the regional community than the Bovine Tb programme as the focus will principally be on biodiversity enhancement. This proposal provides an opportunity to consider ‘wrapping’ all biodiversity focused pest management costs into a regional uniform charge or targeted rate. The 2006/07 KNE / TA Reserves spend was approximately \$958,000 (including overheads) with around \$150,000 funded by the affected TAs’. The remaining contribution came from General Rates.

Uniform Annual Charge

A uniform annual charge is appropriate if GW decided that all properties, irrespective of size, benefit from a regional biodiversity programme. Adding Option 7 costs to the existing KNE/Reserves programme in year one brings the total cost to \$1.91M. If this was to be funded by a uniform annual ‘biodiversity’ charge across all rateable properties, a charge of \$10.33 per property assessment would apply. This would increase to \$13.47 per assessment when the new programme reached peak expenditure at \$2.5M.

Note that these totals are calculated on the basis that GW would continue to fund the regional share of the Bovine Tb programme. If GW decided to discontinue this contribution then approximately \$400-450,000 annually of general rate would not be required.

Land Area Rate & Uniform Annual Charge

Whilst a full uniform annual charge provides for a simpler collection mechanism, it may not adequately reflect the direct economic benefit that affected landowners will get from a new programme. Apportioning a percentage of the total cost directly to landowners may be appropriate. A targeted land area rate is considered the most appropriate mechanism on the basis that control costs are mainly associated with area. This cost should ideally be assigned to all rateable land in the region as all landowners will eventually benefit from a GW programme. However, it is acknowledged that collection costs for small property sizes may be uneconomical. A number of regional councils use a 4 hectare size as the minimum for targeted pest management rates.

Regional Rate

Funding the entire 2009/10 Maintain the Gains programme under Option 7 would require a 1.4% increase in the regional rates. This would increase to approximately 2.66% when the programme expenditure increased to \$2.5M. The current equalised capital value split for the region is 19% urban, 71% residential and 10% rural. It is questionable whether apportionment under equalised capital value adequately reflects the beneficiary / exacerbator weightings of a Maintain the Gains programme. The same concern would apply if a targeted rate using capital value was to be considered.

9. Communications

Communications have occurred with affected landowners through the survey, and discussions have taken place with the Wairarapa Hill Country Advisory and Wellington Regional Health Advisory Committees. Further consultation is recommended with both affected landowners and wider community once the proposal is developed to the satisfaction of the Committee and assuming Council agrees to include this proposal in the draft LTCCP.

10. Recommendations

That the Committee:

1. ***Receives the report.***
2. ***Notes the content of the report.***
3. ***Agrees in principle that a new possum / predator control programme should be investigated further by staff with the aim of inclusion in the Draft 2009/10 Long Term Council Community Plan for public consultation;***
4. ***Requests staff to further develop the funding options for consideration by the Committee at its next meeting in September 2008.***
5. ***Requests staff to prepare a summary proposal outlining the new possum / predator control programme, under the banner Maintain the Gains, for the Committee's consideration at the next meeting.***

Report prepared by:

Report approved by:

Wayne O'Donnell
Manager, Biosecurity

Geoff Dick
Divisional Manager, Catchment Management