

Release of cruel rabbit poison in ACT raises ethical and legal questions

The Animal Defenders Office (ADO) condemns the release of a new strain of rabbit poison known as 'RHDV1 K5'.¹

There is no doubt the 'K5' poison is cruel to animals. Recent reports of pet owners and breeders being concerned about the effect of the poison on their rabbits shows that, objectively, the poison is cruel.²

The new strain is supposed to be more humane than its predecessor, which was introduced 20 years ago, because the new poison kills the animals more quickly. Yet the K5 strain is still horrifyingly inhumane. It causes internal bleeding, rapid multiple organ failure and death in up to 48 hours of suffering.³ One only has to picture a beloved pet dog suffering such a drawn-out death to know that this is a completely unacceptable method of killing sentient animals in the 21st century.

This cruel poison will be released today in at least two locations in Canberra.⁴ The poison will be laid in the form of carrots laced with the virus.

One of the (many) problems with the K5 virus is that it does not discriminate between members of a species. It spreads via insects such as mosquitos, and therefore can easily kill companion rabbits. As anyone who has cared for a rabbit will attest, they are intelligent, loving, affectionate animals who can live for over 10 years and become just as much a part of the family as cats and dogs. There would be a major public outcry if governments released a virus that would kill wild dogs but could also kill pet dogs.

While the ADO condemns the use of poison on any animal, we note that laying poison to kill wild animals where it's 'reasonably likely' the poison will kill domestic animals is against the law.⁵ This is a strict liability offence; the poisoner does not need to intend to kill, or even be reckless about killing, the 'wrong' members of the species. It's enough if there was a reasonable likelihood that the wrong animals will be killed.

So has the Government done enough to make it 'reasonably unlikely' that *domestic* rabbits will be killed by the poison?

Governments across Australia chose not to consult with animal welfare groups about the impact of the new virus on domestic rabbits, released no major announcement to warn rabbit owners of the impending release of the virus and to advise of preventative measures, and appear to have made no attempt to ensure that the vaccine which protects rabbits against this new strain was available in the country before the virus was released.⁶ Instead, rabbit owners have been left to fend for themselves in protecting their pets, with little (and conflicting) information available from reliable sources.

The ADO argues that this is just one of many problems with trying to deal with wild rabbit populations by releasing an inhumane virus. Ethical issues aside, they don't really work. This new strain will kill 20-40% of wild rabbits at the targeted areas. Myxomatosis, the first poison, was released in the 1950s and killed almost all the targeted wild rabbits, but the population soon bounced back to previous levels.

The ADO hopes that a humane alternative to biological control agents will one day be considered. Such an alternative could hardly be less effective than the current inhumane and unethical methods.

¹ It is also known as the new 'Korean strain' of the existing calicivirus poison.

² <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/environment/animals/canberra-vets-struggle-to-keep-up-with-demand-for-calicivirus-vaccine-20170228-gunr43.html>

³ <http://www.pestsmart.org.au/rhdv-k5-frequently-asked-questions/>

⁴ Boboyan Valley (in South Namadgi National Park) and land adjacent to Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve:

<http://www.thecourier.com.au/story/4495433/new-calicivirus-strain-expected-to-wipe-out-nearly-40-per-cent-of-act-wild-rabbits/?cs=31>

⁵ *Animal Welfare Act 1992 (ACT)*, s12A(3).

⁶ See footnote 2.