Rabbit damage to pastures

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RABBITS eat a lot of pasture that would be normally available for other more profitable types of livestock. Just how much they do eat we cannot say, although most farmers have their own ideas on the subject. Some farmers maintain that a rabbit will eat (or damage) as much pasture as a sheep; others say that 12 rabbits are needed to equal one sheep. Possibly the true figure lies somewhere between these limits, but if any reader has definite views or recorded observations on the comparisons, I would be glad to hear from him.

It must be borne in mind however, that in special circumstances these figures do not apply. Because a rabbit can graze pasture much more closely than large stock, his effect on the pastures is theoretically equal to that of any number of cattle. Take, for instance, the case of newly-germinated clover at the two-leaf stage. Cattle cannot eat it at this stage, but the rabbits can, and do. Rabbits have, for this reason, often prevented the establishment of clovers when even heavy stocking with cattle would have allowed the clovers to grow successfully.

Take also the damage that rabbits can do to perennial grasses during the summer months. During this period of semi-dormancy, the rabbits can so weaken the plants that subsequent close grazing will eliminate them from the pasture.

SOUTH-WEST EXPERIMENTS

Last year, the Agriculture Protection Board, as a demonstration, fenced off a number of small plots of pasture on different properties in the Manjimup area and kept them under observation.

The plots were only 5 yards x 2 yards in extent and they were subdivided to give two equal areas. From one half, the stock were excluded but rabbits could feed freely. The other half was netted so that neither stock nor rabbits could reach the plants.

The areas were fenced during August, 1954, and the pastures cut in December, 1954. After cutting, the plant material from each section was allowed to dry out and was then weighed to compare the yields.

In areas that were free of rabbits there was naturally no significant difference between the yields of the two halves.

In areas where the infestation was classified as “light,” the rabbit-grazed portions of four plots showed losses of 10 per cent., 29.3 per cent., 36.1 per cent. and 47.6 per cent. of the plant material respectively.

In two areas classified as having “moderate” rabbit infestation, the losses were 26.9 per cent. and 32.9 per cent.
Another two plots in areas of “Heavy” rabbit infestation showed losses of 62.2 per cent and 76.8 per cent., while on two other properties where the infestation was classed as “Very Heavy” one plot showed a loss of 86.5 per cent. of the pasture and the other was eaten bare—in other words, the rabbits took 100 per cent. of the pasture.

Just so that you can get a clear picture of the losses that rabbits are causing, here are those figures again in tabulated form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Infestation</th>
<th>Pasture Eaten by Rabbits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>10%; 29.3%; 36.1%; 47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>26.9%; 32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>62.2%; 76.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Heavy</td>
<td>86.5%; 100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Admittedly, this was only a small scale experiment and may not give an entirely true picture. A large-scale trial is ready to commence this year which may give us further information. Nevertheless it shows that the rabbit is costing the industry far more than it can afford to pay.

The actual pasture lost is not the whole story either. It is well-known that where rabbits are plentiful, their selective feeding habits will change the quality of the pasture.

They eat out the tastiest (and these are usually the most nutritious) plants first, allowing the poor-quality plants to take over.

To illustrate this, we made estimates of the composition of the pastures on the four farms listed as areas of “Heavy” and “Very Heavy” rabbit infestation. The percentages were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pasture Species (Open Quadrant)</th>
<th>Farm A (100% Eaten)</th>
<th>Farm B (86.5% Eaten)</th>
<th>Farm C (76.8% Eaten)</th>
<th>Farm D (62.2% Eaten)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giblett Grass (Lotus spp.)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Grass (Festuca spp.)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorrel (Rumex spp.)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shivery Grass (Briza spp.)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moss</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Trace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flatweed (Taraxicum officinale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capeweed (Cryptostemma endiuliscum)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All four properties are situated in the West Manjimup, Yanmah and Dixvale areas, which, in the past have been very heavily infested with rabbits. Last summer they were heavily baited with “1080” and we look to this new poison to give farmers an opportunity to improve their pastures and increase production.

**ENGLISH EXPERIMENTS**

At this stage, perhaps I may be permitted to digress and give some details of work carried out in England in 1950-52 in an attempt to assess the effects of rabbit infestation in reducing wheat yields.

Taken over six provinces and 119 sites the yield of wheat per acre on the netted plots average 23.6 cwt. to the acre. The yield on the unfenced plots was reduced by 1.6 cwt. per acre. This amounted to an average loss of yield of the order of 6.7 per cent.

On areas where the rabbit damage was described as “Moderate” the reduction was 15 per cent. and on areas where the infestation was described as “Severe” there was an overall diminution in yield of 20 per cent.

**RABBIT CONTROL IS IMPORTANT**

During the 60 years that rabbits have been present in this State, they have come to be regarded by the average West Australian as a normal feature of our rural scene—and a convenient method of augmenting children’s pocket-money during the school holidays.

Landholders have tended to ignore the problem of rabbit control or at least to give it low priority in the list of jobs to be done.

Surely, the figures I have quoted are evidence that rabbit control deserves top priority. Even at a conservative estimate, there must be many farms on which rabbits are eating half the pasture.

Imagine what would be said and done if somebody came on to your property and helped himself to half of your sheep, half your crop, or half of your dairy herd or cream cheque! Yet there are many properties where the rabbits have done this for years. Where is the sense in expend-

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ing money on labour, fuel, seed and fer-
tiliser to sow 400 acres of crop when 200
acres will be eaten by rabbits?

Surely it would be a sounder proposition
to crop 200 acres AFTER getting rid of
the rabbits.

The full impact of “robbery by rabbits”
has not been felt during periods of bounti-
ful seasons and high prices attendant
upon a “sellers’ market.”

With the tightening-up which must
eventually follow upon the saturation of
the world wheat market and increased
competition from synthetic fibres, there
will be a marked narrowing of profit mar-
gins.

Don’t wait until reduced profits force
you into paying due attention to your
rabbit control problems. Get busy NOW
before it is too late.

**RABBIT CONTROL**

Probably as a result of the favourable season
and abundance of feed, increased numbers of
young rabbits are reported from most agricul-
tural districts.

Field officers report that litters are larger than
usual and a number of unoccupied warrens have
now been utilised by rabbits moving in from
bush country.

The recent wet weather has prevented many
farmers from carrying out control work and it is
essential that this should be resumed as soon
as possible. Even in districts where myxomatosis
has reduced the rabbit populations, there is
usually a residue of survivors which are already
breeding rapidly.

The importance of fumigating and warren-
ripping cannot be over-emphasised. The Agri-
cultural Protection Board warren-ripping units,
Nos. 2 and 3, have been operating in the Moora
district and during October, a total of 373 hours
work was carried out on 36 properties.

The “1080” poisoning scheme came into opera-
tion during November in the Kojonup, Cran-
brook, Upper Blackwood, Tambellup, Mt. Barker
and Preston districts where 85 per cent. of the
farmers have asked to be incorporated into the
scheme.

Unconfirmed reports of new outbreaks of
myxomatosis have been received from the Old-
field River, Manjimup, Perup and Middlesex
areas, and also a confirmed report of an out-
break at Pootenup. An outbreak previously re-
ported from Kulin is spreading over a large area.

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