Bonuses for vermin control - (A paper presented at the Interstate Conference on Vermin Control held in Perth, March, 1957)

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WHILE animal and bird pest control authorities and experts throughout the world condemn bonus systems, bonuses not only receive tremendous support from the graziers and farmers directly affected by the pests, but they are still being widely backed and used by local and government authorities. In Australia today bonuses are being paid in all States (possibly excluding Tasmania) and in some cases are regarded by the primary producers and authorities as a major control measure.

So strongly do responsible bodies such as the Graziers' Federal Council advocate the continuation and even extension of bonus payments to control wild dogs and other pests that it is high time a conference such as this should study the system. It may be possible to present those concerned—particularly State and Commonwealth Government Departments and primary producer organisations—with some important facts on the subject.

Possibly the best way to do this would be to consider why bonuses are paid, arguments advanced in their favour and against them and any other relevant points.

WHY BONUSES ARE PAID

It will be agreed that bonuses are intended as an inducement or incentive for people to destroy pests. They may be paid on certain specific individual "killers" or as a uniform payment for the destruction of every one of the pests throughout a district.

The payments constitute reimbursement of expenditure on destruction measures by those directly affected by the pests (such as station owners destroying wild dogs attacking their sheep) and this will have some importance with landholders along the outer fringes who may possibly be protecting those further within settlement.

However their greatest importance in the eyes of the farmers and pastoralists would be to induce those not so directly involved to destroy the pests. This would include farm or station hands and professional or part-time hunters.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF BONUSES

The supporters of bonus payments claim that—

(i) They assist farmers and pastoralists in their battle against vermin by meeting part of the costs.
(ii) They are an incentive to employees to carry out more destruction work than they normally would do.
(iii) They also induce many other people who would not normally be interested to become part-time destroyers, such as hunting parties from towns.
(iv) When offered for an individual "killer" at a high rate, they attract the most skilled persons.
(v) Scalps received are concrete evidence of destruction which indicates that employees are actually carrying out destruction work. In any case, every scalp produced is proof of one pest less.
(vi) In the absence of any better control work, bonuses are better than nothing.
BONUSES

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RATES PAID & NUMBER OF SCALPS RECEIVED ANNUALLY.
ARGUMENTS AGAINST BONUSES

Those against bonus payments contend that—

(i) There is a very strong tendency for bonuses to become regarded as the actual destruction method, instead as an inducement for others to assist. As a result, many farmers and pastoralists who should be the most active, consider that the bonuses have induced "other people" to deal with the problem, and so they may relax their own efforts. If the vermin become worse then the solution is to raise the bonus, and these "other people" will become more active.

(ii) Any bonus payment system is an open target for fraud, misrepresentation and exploitation. There are innumerable examples of these dishonest practices such as "farming" the pests, trafficking scalps from district to district, false claims, fraudulent practices in disposing of scalps after payments have been made.

(iii) The commercialising of any pest is normally opposed to effective control. For instance, it may be necessary to destroy over 80 per cent. of an animal population to offset the breeding rate. In most cases, long before 80 per cent. of the population was killed, destruction would not be economic as far as bonus hunters are concerned. Once the bulk of the population is destroyed, and possibly while at least 50 per cent. are left, the bonus hunters would move to more lucrative fields leaving the situation virtually unchanged, as far as lasting or permanent relief is concerned.

(iv) The higher the bonus, the more it pays the hunters to concentrate on individual pests instead of any mass destruction technique. Individual scalps become too valuable to take any risks of their being lost. This may be considered an advantage with "killers" but in practice it has meant that sources of infestation such as breeding grounds are neglected while everyone concentrates on a few pests. This will have disastrous results in the long run. An example of this is the decided preference for trapping over poisoning when bonus hunters operate. Owing to the relatively limited area which may be covered by traps, baiting would no doubt be more effective, but as the poisoned animals may move away after taking the baits, and not found, the chances of obtaining the scalps are greatly reduced.

In this manner, the payment of a bonus, especially at a high rate, can and actually does, reduce the number of animals destroyed.

(v) Overseas experience over many years has proved the failure of bonuses. Every publication which mentions bonuses contains some indictment of the system, and extracts would occupy pages. In two American publications are some statements which appear to sum up the situation after the 300 years' experience in the United States with bonus payments.

Young and Jackson (1951) said "State Game Departments and conservationists in general have almost unanimously concluded that the bounty system is not satisfactory as a method of controlling predatory animals." T. D. Scott (1955) stated "The bounty system has been carefully reviewed and found wanting by a number of workers in recent years. (Page 8.) Fraud takes many forms in a bounty system and, undoubtedly there are some techniques that are as yet not generally appreciated, for example, in Michigan the number of foxes bountied declined sharply when a law which designated township clerks as certifying agents for bounty payments was changed in the Fall of 1951 to assign this responsibility to conservation officers." (Page 9.)
Bonuses

Composite graphs of scalp numbers & bonus rates

Fluctuations in numbers of scalps received annually.

Variations in bonus rates.
areas where this system (bonuses) has been in effect, such as Pennsylvania, populations have increased.” (Page 10.)

(vi) Scalp numbers in Western Australia have followed irregular cycles which generally speaking all the scalps—wild dogs, foxes, wedge-tailed eagles and emus—follow together. Alterations in bonus rates, usually for only one of the pests at a time, appear to have had little or only temporary effect on scalp numbers. Upward and downward trends have been maintained whether the bonus has been raised or lowered. On occasions scalps have increased when the bonus rate has been dropped, or have decreased when the amount has been raised. It is well known that foxes (which arrived in Western Australia about 1917) have greatly increased since uniform bonuses were first paid on them in 1928, when 1,407 scalps were received, to the record of over 52,000 in 1954-55. The bonus was originally £2 per head, but has fluctuated between 10s. and 2s. 6d. ever since; it is now 4s. (See graphs.)

A STUDY OF ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE BONUS SYSTEM

While there is little doubt that the weight of the evidence is overwhelmingly against bonuses, some of the arguments in favour cannot be ignored. Points which require considering are:

(a) If there is no other outside assistance offering to those who are suffering from the depredations of a pest, bonuses must appear as at least providing some relief, and as being better than nothing. This same viewpoint is adopted by some local and State authorities responsible for controlling vermin. If they have nothing better to offer, bonuses are the only assistance they can give.

(b) Providing landholders themselves are doing everything possible to deal with a pest, and the funds are not required for any other purpose, bonuses could be useful in inducing outsiders to assist and by subsidising control work by those who are hardest hit.

(c) It will be necessary for some acceptable alternative to the bonus system to be suggested and proved to the farmers and pastoralists before their reliance on the system can be altered. The task is not easy as so many people have come to accept and rely on bonus payments that they will take much convincing. In Western Australia, attempts to substitute organised drives for bonuses on foxes have met with such strong resistance, that the idea has been postponed while some organised drives are conducted as demonstrations of what is intended.

(d) The best alternative appears to be by direct assistance in the organising of carefully planned and co-ordinated control drives, aided by destruction teams and with field extension officers to advise with destruction techniques and to direct and organise destruction work. This boils down to having a definite control policy and well trained field officers to organise carefully planned control drives. Subsidies of destruction materials could assist but are not in themselves a direct control measure.

(e) It is up to the various State central vermin control authorities to evolve and apply these alternative schemes. Even if the facts show that the present bonus payments are mostly a waste of money, the arguments against them are largely ineffective unless there is something else offered which is not only better but acceptable.

REFERENCES


Young, S. P., and Jackson, H. N. T. 1951.—“The Clever Coyote.” p. 223.
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