



# NSWRAB SOP6

## Trapping of rabbits using padded-jaw traps

### Background

The introduced European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) has a significant impact on agricultural production and the environment. Trapping is not considered an effective or efficient rabbit control technique, although it is occasionally used in areas with small, isolated rabbit populations.

Where foot-hold traps are to be used, padded-jaw traps are the more humane alternative, and hence, steel-jaw traps are prohibited in NSW.

This standard operating procedure (SOP) is a guide only; it does not replace or override the relevant legislation that applies in NSW. The SOP should only be used subject to the applicable legal requirements (including WHS) operating in the relevant jurisdiction.

Individual SOPs should be read in conjunction with the overarching Code of Practice for that species to help ensure that the most appropriate control techniques are selected and that they are deployed in a strategic way, usually in combination with other control techniques, to achieve rapid and sustained reduction of pest animal populations and impacts.

### Application

- Trapping is time consuming and labour intensive and is an inefficient method for large-scale rabbit control in Australia.
- Trapping is ineffective in significantly reducing rabbit populations or even maintaining them at low levels. 'Mopping-up' or maintenance control of rabbits is best done using re-ripping, baiting and fumigation.
- Traps have the potential to cause significant injuries, suffering and distress so should only be used when there is no suitable alternative.
- Humane and successful trapping requires extensive training and experience. Trapping by inexperienced operators can result in 'trap-shy' rabbits that are difficult to catch because they have previously escaped from a carelessly prepared and presented trap. Similarly, poor technique can result in greater rates of injuries and non-target captures.
- Selection of appropriate traps and trap sites will maximise the chance of capture and minimise the distress caused to target and non-target animals.
- Every effort must be made to avoid target and non-target deaths from factors such as exposure, shock, capture myopathy and predation.
- Trapping using foot-hold traps is not suitable in urban areas.

- Traps must be used in accordance with relevant state legislation (*Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 s 23*). In NSW, padded-jaw traps are permitted and use of steel-jaw traps is prohibited.
- Once trapped, rabbits are euthanased by neck (cervical) dislocation or stunning, with a sharp blow to the back of the head, followed by neck dislocation. Neck dislocation requires training to ensure that unconsciousness is rapidly induced.

## Animal welfare implications

### Target animals

- Traps must be inspected at least daily to prevent suffering and possible death from exposure, thirst, starvation, predation and/or shock.
- It is preferable to set up traps at sites where vegetation can provide shade and shelter. However, sites should be avoided where there is a risk of the trapped animal becoming entangled in understorey vegetation, which could result in dislocation of the limb.
- Where possible, trapping should be avoided when adverse weather conditions threaten the welfare of trapped animals.
- Foot-hold traps cause pain and distress in three ways: pressure of the trap jaws on the captured limb; restraint of the animal; and injuries sustained in trying to escape. Padded-jaw traps cause less trauma than unpadded traps, but injuries will inevitably occur to some rabbits. These range from swelling of the foot and lacerations to dislocations and fractures. To reduce capture distress, trapped rabbits must be destroyed as quickly and humanely as possible following capture.
- Trapped rabbits may also be preyed upon by foxes, cats and wild dogs causing significant distress.
- Captured animals must be approached carefully and quietly to reduce panic, further stress and risk of injury.
- If lactating females are caught in a trap, reasonable efforts should be made to find dependent kittens and kill them quickly and humanely either by neck dislocation or manually applied concussive blow to the head.
- Trapped rabbits are euthanased by neck (cervical) dislocation. This involves separation of the skull and the brain from the spinal cord by pressure applied posterior to the base of the skull. The brain stem - which controls respiration and heart activity - is consequently damaged, stopping breathing and reducing blood flow to the brain, leading to death. Studies in rats have shown that electrical activity in the brain persists for around 13 seconds following cervical dislocation. This may represent a period of remaining consciousness.

### Non-target animals

- Traps are not target specific, so a wide range of non-target species may be caught. These can include birds (e.g., ravens, magpies, and pied currawongs), kangaroos, wallabies, hares, echidnas, goannas, wombats, possums, bandicoots and sheep.

- Different groups of non-target animals suffer different levels of injury and distress. For example:
  - wallabies often experience serious injuries e.g., dislocations, due to the morphology of their limbs and because they become very agitated when restrained.
  - goannas (e.g., lace monitors) also suffer from dislocations and can die from hyperthermia.
  - birds and other small animals may be preyed upon by foxes, cats and wild dogs while caught in traps.
- Traps must not be set near areas such as waterholes or gully crossings that are regularly frequented by non-target species.
- Live non-target animals caught in traps must be examined for injuries and signs of illness or distress and dealt with as follows:
  - Animals which are unharmed or have only received minimal injuries such as minor cuts or abrasions should be immediately released at the site of capture.
  - Animals which have more severe injuries or that are suffering from thermal stress should receive appropriate attention. An animal suffering from thermal stress can initially be placed in a suitable quiet holding area that provides warmth or shade to allow recovery before release. Animals with treatable injuries that cannot be immediately released or those failing to recover from thermal stress should be presented to a veterinarian or a registered wildlife carer for treatment.
  - Animals that have injuries that are untreatable or that would compromise their survival in the wild should be euthanased using a technique that is suitable for the species. For more information on euthanasia techniques refer to [GEN001 Methods of Euthanasia](#).
- If a domestic pet is caught, it should be taken to the nearest veterinarian, animal shelter or council pound where it can be examined for injuries, scanned for a microchip and the owner contacted, or assessed for suitability for re-homing.
- If wild dogs or foxes are caught in the trap, they must be euthanased quickly and humanely by a shot to the brain using an appropriate firearm (refer to *NSWDOG SOP1 Trapping of wild dogs using padded-jaw traps* and *NSWFOX SOP5 Trapping of foxes using padded-jaw traps*).

## Workplace health and safety considerations

- Operators should be wary of the risks of injury when placing and setting traps. Protective clothing, boots and leather gloves may help prevent injuries from shovels, hammers and trap jaws.
- Long sleeved, heavy duty overalls and long trousers should be worn to protect the operator from being scratched by rabbits during handling. Protective gloves may be used if required, although these may hinder dexterity.
- Operators must be protected by tetanus immunisation in case of infection of scratches and bites.

- Good personal hygiene is encouraged when handling wild animals. Routinely wash hands and other skin surfaces contaminated with faeces, blood and other body fluids.

## Equipment Required

### Traps

- Approved padded-jaw traps suitable for catching rabbits must be used, e.g., Victor Soft-Catch trap no.1. Note that it is illegal to use steel-jawed traps in NSW.
- Traps must have the following characteristics:
  - The jaws have no teeth.
  - The jaws are offset to increase the space between them when closed (i.e., a gap (minimum 6mm) remains when the jaws are closed).
  - Each jaw has a rubber-like pad to cushion the impact of the jaws on the limb and to prevent the limb sliding out.
- All traps should be checked for damage, sharp surfaces and malfunctions (e.g., loose rubber pads) before they are taken into the field.
- Traps should be handled in a way that eliminates contamination with human-related scents. Gloves should also be used when handling and setting traps.
- Traps should also have:
  - A spring placed in the anchor chain to act as a shock absorber, reducing the chance of dislocation of the captured limb. Swivels are located on both ends of the anchor chain allowing the trap to twist as the animal struggles to escape.
  - Pan tension adjusted to suit the target species so that an appropriate force is required to depress the pan and trigger the trap. This minimises the chance of non-target animals setting off the trap.

### Firearms and ammunition

- Smaller calibre rifles such as a .22 rimfire, with hollow- or soft-point ammunition, are suitable for euthanasia at short range (within 5 metres)
- 12-gauge shotguns with shot sizes of BB or AAA may also be used.

## Procedures

### Selection of trap sites

- Traps should be set only in areas where rabbits are known to be active, e.g., near entrances to warrens and burrows, around hollow logs, dung heaps or earth mounds. Do not set traps near fences and other objects such as small trees, bushes etc. in which the trapped rabbit (or non-target) may become entangled.
- Do not set traps where non-target captures (including livestock) are likely.

- The location (GPS coordinates) of all trap sites and number of traps must be accurately recorded and marked. This information should be readily available to others in case the trapper is unable to return to check the traps.
- The recording of target and non-target captures as well as injuries can also be valuable in the constant improvement of trapping technique.
- On-line apps such as FeralScan may assist in these processes:  
<https://www.feralscan.org.au/>.
- Signage should be deployed on public lands to advise that traps are being used in the area.

### **Setting of traps**

- Traps should be set at the end of each day and checked early each morning. If traps are left set during the day, they should be checked again in late afternoon.
- Before setting each trap ensure that it is functioning properly.
- Traps should only be anchored to stakes or fixed objects if there is a shock absorbing device such as a spring fitted to the anchor chain and a swivel attaching the chain to the trap. It is recommended to use a short length of chain (approx. 30 to 50 cm).
- Set the trap and place into position in the hole in the ground. Ensure that surrounding shrubs or debris will not interfere with the trap mechanism.
- Carefully camouflage the area around the trap with leaves, grass debris etc. but leave a slightly cleared area (10-15cm) over the area of the plate.

### **Euthanasia of rabbits**

- Trapped live rabbits must be euthanased as soon as possible after capture. The most appropriate technique is either (1) neck dislocation (for smaller rabbits <1kg), or (2) stunning, by a sharp blow to the back of the head, followed by neck dislocation (for larger rabbits).
- Where shooting is the most appropriate means of euthanasia, smaller calibre rifles such as a .22 rimfire, with hollow- or soft-point ammunition, are suitable for use at short range (from 5-25cm away).

### **Neck (cervical) dislocation**

- This technique should only be used on smaller rabbits (<1 kg). In larger rabbits, greater muscle mass in the neck region makes manual cervical dislocation physically more difficult; accordingly, it should be performed only by individuals who have demonstrated proficiency in euthanasing heavier animals or preferably, after the rabbit has been stunned by a blow to the head (see below).
- Hold the rabbit head downwards by grasping the hind legs in one hand; turn the palm of the other hand towards the rabbit head and take the neck between the thumb and index finger or between the index and middle fingers. Push down so that the neck is stretched, and the head moves backwards, until dislocation is felt. Although considerable kicking and other muscular movements may take place, once consciousness is lost, the animal is not sensitive to pain.

- Assisted manual cervical dislocation devices can also be used

### **Stunning followed by neck (cervical) dislocation**

- Larger rabbits (> 1 kg) will need to be stunned prior to applying neck dislocation.
- Stunning is done by holding the rabbit up by the hind legs and swinging it firmly and quickly in an arc so that the back of its head hits a hard surface such as a rock or post. Alternatively, a single, heavy, sharp blow can be delivered to the back of the skull behind the ears using a blunt metal or heavy wooden bar.
- After stunning to render the animal insensible, dislocate the neck using the technique described above.
- Death of animals should always be confirmed by observing a combination of the following:
  - no heartbeat
  - no breathing
  - no corneal reflex (no blinking when eyeball is touched)
  - no response to a toe pinch (a firm squeeze of the pad or large toe).
- Euthanasia should only be performed by trained operators. Acquiring (or re-acquiring) the skills to use physical methods of euthanasia may be accomplished by practising the techniques on dead animals, preferably those recently killed, and be subject to close scrutiny by those with experience in the method.

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