Farmers perceptions of dingo management in north-west Victoria

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A report to the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action, Victoria

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Cover photo by Roger Wilkinson:
Big Billy, reputedly the only permanent water source in the Big Desert, June 2024

Summary

This report was commissioned by Agriculture Victoria, following a change to the Dingo Unprotection Order in north-west Victoria on 14 March 2024. Following this change, dingoes (previously thought to be wild dogs) in north-west Victoria are now protected and lethal control is not permitted. The report provides the findings of a series of eight focus groups held in June 2024 with a total of 55 livestock farmers around the boundary of the Big Desert in north-west Victoria on the topic of dingoes and their management.

The animal and its impacts

Almost universally, participants considered that the animals in the Big Desert were wild dogs and not dingoes. Their opinion was based on what the dog looked like. Participants were sceptical of scientists' estimates are that there were somewhere between 40 and 230 adult dingoes in the Big Desert, and that dingo numbers were decreasing.

All groups had either experienced dingo attacks on their sheep in the past or knew people who were experiencing current or recent attacks. Participants described in graphic and often emotional terms the aftermath of dingo attacks on their sheep and its effect on their mental health.

Dingoes' elusive nature earned them quiet admiration. There was general agreement that dingoes came out of the park to drink water from farmers' troughs. However, there was no consensus on the merits of providing water within the park.

Dingo control options

Participants described having used a combination of trapping, poisoning and shooting for lethal control of dingoes in the past. The previous Unprotection Order system was seen as working well and they wanted it reinstated. They thought that only a small number of dingoes were causing their livestock predations problems and emphasised that they wanted to kill only this small number.

Guardian animals, whether donkeys, alpacas or Maremma dogs, were seen as ineffective at providing the scale of protection required.

Exclusion fencing was described as having the potential to work if it was done properly. However, fencing was seen as expensive. Land clearing rules did not allow enough room for erection and maintenance of a fence on the property boundary. Fencing also needed constant maintenance. Participants also said an exclusion fence needed to be continuous over a long distance to be effective but farmers with no livestock would have no incentive to erect a fence, so a coordinated approach was needed. A substantial government contribution to the cost of fencing was seen as required.

Some participants said they were considering getting out of sheep, particularly on blocks of land close to or bordering the park.

Farmers' relationship with government

Many participants expressed a lack of faith or trust in government. This had several dimensions. First, they felt they had willingly provided samples and data to government in the part, and it was now

being used by government to their detriment. Second, the Unprotection Order had been revoked suddenly, with no consultation. Third, they were sceptical of the research that had been cited as the reason for removing the Unprotection Order. Fourth, they felt reporting dingo incidents in future would result in unwelcome scrutiny of their activities by government. Fifth, although they had been promised continued ability to apply for Authority to Control Wildlife permits for dingoes, their experience was that even if they met all the conditions for a permit, no permit would be granted due to low dingo numbers. Rebuilding this trust will require a lot of work and good faith by government.

Several participants suggested they were being required to bear all the costs of the decision to remove the Unprotection Order but received almost none of the benefits. This was seen as unfair. There were strong demands for government to contribute a substantial proportion of the high cost of exclusion fencing. The promised $550,000 interim funding stream was seen as not going very far. Compensation for sheep lost was seen as better than nothing but much less useful than a decent support package.

Other animals

Participants were asked about other animals they did not want on their farms. The most commonly discussed were rabbits, foxes, kangaroos and emus. A few other animals were mentioned occasionally.

The consensus was that rabbits had been a big problem but were now being well managed through coordinated activities. Institutional barriers to rabbit control included:

- No longer being allowed to mix their own baits
- Not being allowed to remove vegetation to rip warrens
- A government requirement to rip warrens on public land to a maximum depth that was described as ineffective
- Not being allowed to poison in road reserves
- Unclear demarcation of land tenure boundaries
- Being forced to use expensive control methods close to towns.

Kangaroos were considered to be present in large and sometimes increasing numbers. Both kangaroos and emus were described as causing damage to fences.

The future

Participants were generally in favour of a program of research that involved catching dingoes, attaching radio collars to them and tracking their movements.

Although they were frustrated by the sudden removal of a program they felt was working well, the north-west farmers we talked to were willing to work with government to explore options for dingo control and management. They felt, however, that government had so far shouldered none of the burden and should now make a much greater contribution on behalf of the entire Victorian public.

Contents

Introduction and method

On 14 March 2024, the Victorian Government withdrew the dingo unprotection order in north-west Victoria due to new scientific information about the local dingo population's imminent risk of extinction. A $550,000 North West Vertebrate Pest Management Pilot Project was announced at the same time. The stated aim of the pilot project is to better understand dingo movement and behaviour, support farmers by building awareness of non-lethal control options to protect livestock from dingo predation, and promote collaborative, cross-tenure management programs for an expanded range of vertebrate pest animals including foxes, rabbits, feral pigs and feral goats. As part of the project, a series of focus groups was convened with farmers in north-west Victoria to seek their input into the pilot project and provide an opportunity to discuss the changes to the dingo unprotection order. The sessions were organised and convened by Agriculture Victoria. I was contracted to design the research, facilitate the focus groups, analyse the data and produce this report.

A total of eight focus group discussions were held. These covered areas of Victoria bordering the Litte Desert, which is where the dingoes in north-west Victoria live. The groups were: Murrayville, Underbool, Patchewollock (2 groups), Hopetoun, Rainbow, Yanac and Telopea Downs. A total of 55 local farmers (including some landcare facilitators) participated, two of whom attended two sessions, making for a total of 53 individuals participating.

Several Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) staff attended each focus group session to answer questions from several perspectives. In attendance were staff from the Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples Group (Biodiversity and the Wild Dog Management Program) and Agriculture Victoria Group (Policy and the Plants, Chemicals and Invasives Branch), as well as me as the facilitator there were between three and six DEECA staff at each session. Both Agriculture Victoria staff and I thought it was important that farmers questions were able to be answered in the sessions.

The focus group design was chosen because it enabled everyone present to have their say. The public meeting format is vulnerable to having articulate and forthright individuals doing most of the talking. Holding interviews with individual farmers risked them being overwhelmed by the number of DEECA staff present. All eight sessions were held during June 2024. The list of topic and questions used in the sessions is provided in the Appendix.

In this report verbatim quotations from participants are presented in italics. These quotes are more extensive than in many focus group reports because I have found this gives participants their own voice. Some light editing may have been done for clarity: generally, any edits are enclosed within square brackets. Anything said by me as facilitator or by DEECA staff is presented in normal font, also within square brackets.

Findings

The animal and its impacts

"Wild dog" or "dingo"?

Almost universally, participants considered that the animals in the Big Desert were wild dogs and not dingoes. Their opinion was based on what the dog looked like. They described the animals they saw as not looking at all like stereotypical red or yellow dingoes but instead looked more like a domestic dog or a cross between a dingo and a domestic dog. The look of the animals was important to many participants, and it bolstered a belief that they were not really dingoes at all: *I just can't believe that about the purity. They look like Alsatians, they look like sheep dogs. They can't be pure, so you're protecting mongrels*.

There was recognition that the animals looked different in different parts of Australia: *So how do they call them a dingo, when if you type in dingo Australia, you get this yellow dog, with a big, long tail, stands so tall.* [Yeah, and they don't look like that here, do they?] *Nothing like them. The same as the ones in the high country as well, the high-country ones are black, they're that tall and they have a short tail*.

The belief that the animals in the Big Desert were not dingoes because they did not look like stereotypical dingoes was part of a web of beliefs that also included low levels of trust in scientists and their research and a greater trust of local knowledge than research evidence (these were more beliefs in this web, and they will be discussed later). These beliefs amplified each other, and it was not clear whether any of them led to the others: *We all know that they're crossbreeds with wild sheep dogs and cattle dogs and domestic dogs. Because there's various dogs shot that don't resemble anything like a yellow dog. At all.*

Participants did generally agree on a description of the animals: *We hit a litter last year and we got the whole litter … and I weighed all those pups and they weighed 15 to 16 kg. — Black and white, the first three were black and white with spots… and the rest were like my black and tan kelpies at home. Black and tan … — And the tail is bushy.* [Short and bushy you've got out here?] *Yeah. The tail is bushy. — And I would say 99% of them have got a white tip on their tail.* [Okay, and are there legs quite stocky?] *Yeah. — The fronts on them are a lot bigger than the back. — I think it's for going straight in the sand. Short tail, little pricky ears*.

Population

Scientists' estimates are that there are somewhere between 40 and 230 adult dingoes in the Big Desert. Participants disputed that. This was based partly on anecdotal evidence: *Before the restrictions came in, I'm aware of 8 dogs in probably a 15 km radius and they're different dogs. So that's where I think the mistrust comes on the figures … to say that we've had the conversation with others and we must be seeing the same dogs, that's rubbish.* [You're seeing different ones?] *I can tell [different] dogs, we know the different dogs.* It was also partly based on distrust of the scientists and their research: *You've*

plucked a number out of the sky, basically, to work out how many are there, because if you work out where your cameras are, you've got your cameras in about 1% of the park.

The other aspect of the scientific estimates of the population disputed by participants were that dingo numbers were decreasing. Participants said that both sightings and attacks were not decreasing: *The last 10 years, we've had exponential damage, so it's pretty obvious the numbers are going up and you're saying, no, no, they're virtually extinct. If they're virtually extinct, they wouldn't be coming on our farms and causing massive damage and it wouldn't be a problem*..

Dingo numbers were described as rising (or at least not decreasing) despite extensive efforts to undertake lethal control, suggesting that they were seen as not endangered at all: *The dog numbers are high enough that even with poisoning and integrated shooting the numbers were still rising. — Last 10 to 15 years things got totally out of hand as far as we're concerned. — Prior to that we were very lucky. It was a rare occurrence to see a wild dog*.

This was the considered opinion of a respected local: *I think the current population of the desert ... and bear in mind that the desert has decreased in size over the last 60 years … So the population that's out there, and the water supply that's there, I believe 40 of the 80 dogs that have been quoted is the population … I reckon the 40 dogs that are supposed to be there and I really don't know whether there's more or not, I think that would be a very conservative estimate, but that might be the carrying capacity of that piece of land … I don't think every bitch does have pups. Over the years, during the breeding season, some bitches don't suckle. I'm fairly sure of that … these dogs are territorial, but they come together, but they're loners*.

Whatever the population, there was a feeling that it was too many: *If there's 40 or 50 of them, or 200 left, that's all that's bloody needed, we can't stand any more.*

Attacks

Not all groups were in areas where attacks on livestock by dingoes were currently occurring, but all groups had either experienced attacks in the past or knew people who were experiencing current or recent attacks. Here are two examples: *Since 8th of May this year … we would have lost probably 40 ewes, I'm guessing ... we were getting an attack a week and then 2 weeks ago we got 3 attacks in one week*. Participants had long memories. One described owning a block that bordered the National Park: *If there's anyone going to have dog trouble, I'm it. And my family's had it for over 80 years, always had trouble*.

Attacks on livestock by dingoes were often described as random. Participants offered two different perspectives on this randomness. To an individual farmer or farm family dingoes came and went: *When I was a kid, when I was just coming into the farm as a 20-year-old, we had a wild dog problem. And then for some reason they disappeared for probably 30 years, didn't have... there was the odd one, not a real problem. The last 10 years though they have just absolutely gone berserk in their breeding and their problems*. In the region as a whole, dingoes were seen to move around: *This year they are on the east side by the Murrayville track, next year they could be at Ouyen*.

Behaviour

Two main aspects of dingo behaviour were described by participants: that they are elusive and that they come out of the Big Desert for water.

Dingoes' elusive nature earned them quiet admiration: *They're very clever … they seem to know when you're around too. It's like they've got a watchman at the gate and they get a whistle out saying "oh he's going home, righto, let's go"*. A number of the farmer participants with land adjoining the park did not live there and were unable to maintain constant vigilance. Dingoes were seen as hard for scientists to find as well as for farmers: *Realistically though, 3/4 million hectares, you put a few cameras out there, it would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack, right?*.

Several participants said that dingoes came out of the part to drink water from farmers' troughs: *Oh, water's a big issue, there's no water out there. The scrub's got no water at the moment, even the soaks. There's nothing there. — So they're certainly coming out for water, coming out to drink. — Definitely. — There's one permanent water source in the desert.* [And where's that?] *Big Billy. I don't think there's any water at Broken Bucket any more*. It was suggested that the presence of water in surrounding farms kept animals on the edge of the park: *You go into the middle of that desert and you very rarely see any animals in the middle. It's only around the fringe and they're capitalising on what the farmers have done on the fringe by growing pasture and supplying water*.

The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline was seen as increasing water security not only for farm animals but also for animals such as dingoes: *The big change that's happened in this part of Victoria in the last 25 years has been piped water. Prior to that, over the summer period, the dams tended to dry up and there was no water available. Today there's piped water in every paddock and so if you want to open a McDonald's for a dog, you have sheep and water.*

It was also suggested that things were not quite that simple. Other drivers were mentioned: *It's in summer. They're after the water. — When there's no water in the park. — Or when they're lambing, the noise of the lamb*. And the random nature of dingo movements was also applied to water: *I'm probably 5 or 10 kms away from the desert, they're walking past half a dozen troughs to get to mine, so it's not coming out for water*.

Several other comments were made about dingo behaviour. Some were about timing: *When do they have their pups? — Oh... August, October* [And how many pups might a female have?] *Something I'm not really familiar with but I speculate probably half a dozen now ... 2–4 might survive … In my opinion, this is not scientifically proven, but I think family unit breaks up to a certain extent when the pups are about 5–10 months old and some of them do look pretty tough, some of them don't survive.* And on when they are most often seen on farms: *Oh well it's usually every March, with the litter and they struggle for feed and water and they come into the farming country and usually fairly emaciated, so they're just trying to survive and that's where we see most of them … The pups are quite common to see at the end of summer … The big dogs, they're in June, July*.

Participants made various comments on dingoes' living habits and behaviour. The animals were described as living in families, with young dispersing to find new homes. They were also described as liking to have an open track in front of them and being able to jump over fences.

Impacts

Participants described in graphic terms the aftermath of dingo attacks on their sheep. Despite variations in the specifics of the language, dingo attacks on sheep were always described as lethal. Even if the sheep were not killed by dingoes, they died later from the injuries. Some participants said dingoes would eat only parts of the sheep. Others said they attacked sheep to educate their pups. *They don't kill them actually, they just pull their sides out and they run around with their guts hanging out. You find them – run them till they knock their back leg off, and just leave them alive. So I don't know how you couldn't kill the dog that does that to your lambs, because you can go there and find 30 sheep not dead, just injured. And then once they've been bitten by a dog … the sheep ends up dying anyway*. Sheep were seen as easier prey than other animals, such as kangaroos.

Dingo attacks were seen as different from other causes of sheep losses because of their impact on the mental health of affected farmers. A small number of participants were able to describe it in measured terms: *I think the worst problem is wild dogs, because of the angst and the maim that they cause. The cruelty of what they do. It's not just a livelihood problem, it's not just a financial problem, it's a mental issue as well, a big mental issue, which is very, very hard to combat*.

Most participants, however, became emotional: *When you go into a paddock after a dog attack, straight away, as soon as you drive through the gate, you know. Dogs have been here tonight. Sheep are scattered all over the bloody place and then you'll come across the cattle, they've got their arse ripped out, go down the paddock a bit more and there's another one, bloody intestines ripped out, dragging on the ground. It's bloody depressing.*

There was talk of people being scared for their physical health as well as mental: *My sister heard on the radio that there are children in Gippsland who will not walk down tracks because they are afraid the dogs are going to attack them, the wild dogs, the dingos, they're going to attack them*.

The mental health impacts of dingo attacks were felt by people both young and old: *I've seen a neighbour of mine in tears, a grown man, 20 years older than me, been farming all his life. I've seen him in tears when he's gone out and seen a mob of 35 just gutted, just a couple of dogs playing*. Some participants described not being able to get help to deal with them: *Between Mildura and Warracknabeal there's not really a doctor, you know we have interim doctors week by week in Ouyen, so there is no medical care. So that's not available to us. We have to deal with that ourselves*.

The dingo's future in the North-west

Because low dingo numbers were cited by government as a major reason for removing the Unprotection Order, some participants worried about the potential use of artificial means to increase the dingo population:

There was also some concern about private individuals in the area breeding dingoes, including worry that dingoes might be released: *There's a lot of passionate conservationist people out there that will do whatever they think to them is right, whether it's releasing dingos or wombats*. Several participants had heard about plans to reintroduce dingoes into the Grampians National Parks and expressed alarm at this prospect.

Some participants did not want dingoes to come onto farms at all: *And if we've got to keep our stock out of the park, keep their livestock out of the farms. If you want to keep them in a natural environment, the natural environment's the park. The only way they belong out here is if you buy all the farmland back and you turn it back into natural environment. Other than that, they do not belong here*.

Lethal control

Lethal control undertaken

Participants described having used a combination of trapping, poisoning and shooting for lethal control of dingoes. Only one participant mentioned Canid Pest Ejectors but was dismissive of them: *The other type of one – what is it, the little spring control type thing.* [CPEs. Canid Pest Ejectors.] *Yeah, those ones. We've tried them but they're useless*. Young animals were described as easier to kill than older ones: *Dogs are pretty cunning. I mean you can get the young ones, because they're dumb and they haven't learnt how to survive. But the older ones are very, very cunning*.

Desire to reinstate the Unprotection Order

When discussing lethal controls for dingoes, a common theme was that the previous system was working well and that it should be reinstated: *Everything was working fine*. Participants were keen to retain the 3km buffer zone inside the park, in which lethal control of dingoes could be used. The buffer zone was described as allowing dingoes who remained well inside the park to be left alone and only those who ventured to close to farm land would be targeted for lethal control: *You're not getting the ones that are staying in the middle, you're getting the problem dogs that come out*.

Desire to lethally control only a small number of problem dingoes

While participants wished to retain the right to lethally control dingoes, they clarified that they had no intention of undertaking widespread culling. They thought that only a small number of dingoes were creating their predation problems and emphasised that they wanted to kill only this small number:

- *The thing you've got to remember, we're not really that interested in killing every wild dog or dingo in the park. We're not – if they come in and attack our stock, we'd like them to be cleaned up, so they just don't do it. That's what we're after*.
- *The ones you want are the ones that kill 120 sheep*.

The point was also made that receiving a permit to lethally control a dingo did not guarantee that it would be caught and dispatched: *At the end of the day, if you work out how many sheep farmers you've got up here and you issue each one of them a permit, you're literally not going to be removing many dogs out of the gene pool, because they might have a permit, but they may not get the dog. — They're very hard to get. — They might not get one for two years, it might take them three years to be able to get a dog*.

One suggestion made was to introduce a season system whereby farmers in different areas around the Big Desert would be able to lethally control dingoes only at a particular time of year, with different areas around the park having their seasons at different times of year. This proposed system was described as still needing a buffer zone within the park boundary because it was seen as easier to catch a dog inside the park than in farmland.

Non-lethal control and management

Guardian animals

Guardian animals, whether donkeys, alpacas or Maremma dogs, were not well regarded by participants. They were seen as ineffective at providing the scale of protection required. The paddocks were described as being large (up to 3000 acres) and covered with scattered trees which reduced visibility, which meant that unrealistically large numbers of guardians would be needed:

- *There's no comprehension of the scale of the land that we're dealing with. How do you put dogs over a 10,000-acre farm to protect your livestock? You know, all these stories are coming from English lots of 1 or 2 acres and they've got shepherds all around the place looking after the dogs all the time and they think they're going to put it into the Mallee*.

Guardian animals were sometimes described as being harmful to the very animals they were supposed to protect. This could happen if the guardians had not bonded properly to the flock or herd. Newborn lambs or calves were also described as sometimes not being seen by guardians as part of the flock or herd, and therefore something foreign to be attacked.

Several participants described guardian animals dismissively: *We're trying to farm, not run a zoo*.

One participant provided specific criticisms of each species of guardian animal:
Does the government seriously believe that we have not tried every possible means to keep companion animals and those sorts of things, to eliminate the problem. And I'll say three things, the three companion animals. Maremmas are fantastic dogs … On that property of several thousand acres, where he's got sheep dispersed, he would have to have more Maremmas than sheep damn near to protect them … They're territorial dogs, but he moves his sheep from here to Jeparit … Yes, everybody's tried alpacas, wonderful animals to have a look in the property, if you want to have broken backs in ewes, get some alpacas and I guarantee you'll have 6 to 10% gone within the first two years … Donkeys are fantastic out in the bush, they don't have any trouble because they're on rocky, hard covering. On improved pastures they end up with feet like this and you've got to monitor them. Who's got the skillset here to do donkeys' feet … These three suggestions have been put up and everybody in the room has either tried them or had a neighbour who tried it or done it. We're not fools. So the only alternative is fencing. And there's no point fencing 7 hectares or 7 kilometres … You've got to fence the whole thing off.

Exclusion fencing

Unlike guardian animals, exclusion fencing (the other main method of non-lethal control of dingoes) was at least described as having the potential to work if it was done properly. However, for the most part fencing was described as not working. Specific problems with both erection and maintenance were described, as well as more general issues.

Legal restrictions on land clearing were described as impeding the erection of exclusion fencing: *I rung the council up and they said I can have 4 metres, [1 outside and] 3 inside … how the hell can you get in there and put an exclusion fence up in 3m*. The 4m cleared width allowed was seen as too narrow to build a fence without incurring unnecessary extra expense. The farmers could have erected exclusion fencing far enough inside their property boundary that they had clear access for erection but were reluctant to give up land to achieve this.

Timing and scheduling of fencing erection were also described as problematic. One farmer in the Rainbow group described having a 10-year program of planned fencing, including maintenance of existing fences, removal of old fences and installation of replacement fences. Any new exclusion fencing would need to be inserted into this program and would displace other planned fencing work. The farmer explained that new exclusion fencing could not be erected in addition to the planned fencing program because of difficulties sourcing fencing contractors and the lack of additional farm labour. Additionally, once an old fence was removed the new fence would need to be erected quickly because while there was no fence present the paddock could not be stocked and was out of production. All these logistical issues were seen as separate from and additional to the cost of the new fence. The farmer said because of these issues it would take him six years to erect an exclusion fence.

Exclusion fencing was seen as expensive. Figures of $15,000 per km were quoted as a minimum, in several groups.

Participants described difficulties in maintaining exclusion fencing. In the case of conventional (non-electric) fencing, kangaroos and emus were frequently described as making holes in fences which allowed dingoes to get though the fence. This required constant vigilance to check for holes and repair

them. It was also described as an *endless job* because as soon as a fence was repaired a kangaroo or emu could make another hole.

Electric fences were also described as requiring constant vigilance because they could easily be shorted out by vegetation growing onto it or tree branches falling on it: *The trouble with the electric fence here is in my experience, where there's an existing fence on a boundary in most of the scrub country, you couldn't put an electric outrigger along it — You can't walk along it … — You've got to go on and spray the fence. All the crap, the saplings and the grass, it shorts it out.*

Several issues of scale concerning exclusion fencing were described. Exclusion fencing needed to be continuous to be effective, so if one farmer erected an exclusion fence and their neighbour did not, this would simply move the problem to the next farm along: *A fence is not going to fix the problem, it's only going to shift it*. However, not everybody saw a need to fence out dingoes: *It's not much good trying a fence on our portion, because our neighbours are only crops, so not much good putting a fence up. Wasting your time*.

Participants explained that a continuous fence would also need gates on public roads and at park entrances. This was described as needing to be done properly: *So the only way for the gate system to work there is fully electronic, that opens and shuts when you come up to it. It opens up, you drive through, it automatically shuts behind.* This was seen to be beyond the financial ability of farmers, therefore funding support from government would be needed. One participant also said fencing within or on the boundary of public land may not be respected by unthinking or uncaring tourists.

Sometimes multiple scale issues were described in quick succession: *The total boundary exclusion fence would be better than cell fencing, or what you were talking about [fencing part of a property]. It just wouldn't work in our cropping programme … Plus the fact that you're moving your sheep every 3-4 weeks, that's a different area, so we're dry land farmers here, so your sheep are grazing on predominately stubble all summer … You can fence it all the way to the South Australian border. The farmer that hasn't got any livestock, he's not going to put any money towards fencing. Not a cent and I wouldn't blame him.* [So in those situations would we then have to fence down the boundaries of those... between the livestock and the non-livestock as well? I guess where does the fencing stop and start and is it a trial?] *It doesn't stop and start. That's why it will never work, unless the whole of the perimeter of the park and the state forest is fenced off. But they're the government's dogs, it's their problem. I see it as their problem.* [But if we could look into this potential 50%, it would be something that you'd be happy to discuss further?] … *Well, if the government's prepared to pay 100%, I think you'd get 100% support. There you go. 50% you won't get anyone … I'm looking at $400,000. The dogs are still going to walk around that fence and walk through the road, because the road is still there*.

Deterrents

Deterrents were generally described as ineffective against dingoes: *You've got to imagine the wild dog coming out of the Big Desert … and all of a sudden there's a big thing flashing, I reckon that would baulk him coming out of the scrub. But a fox, if he's come from Underbool out into the desert he's used to car lights or something — But then that dog that [my neighbour] had, it came all the way into his sheepyards. — They'd definitely get used to it*.

Getting out of sheep

Some participants said they were considering getting out of sheep, particularly on blocks of land close to or bordering the park: *I've got several blocks down near the Wyperfield Park ... and we've had constant dog attacks down there for the last 10 to 15 years, to the point where it's getting to the point where we're not going to run any sheep down there.*

One participant shared an even more extreme thought: *So I've got to the point now where, and I haven't said it, but I'll say this now, I'm seriously considering about trying to sell my land. So what do you think my land is going to be worth now than what I was told months ago? About half I reckon. There's no mention of that or any consideration of that in any of this. So the way we farm it has just got to change*. He went on to talk about going into cattle on that block.

Someone else pointed out that getting out of sheep was not always feasible, due to land characteristics: *Most of the country bordering the park is not lending itself to many cropping activities. So there are certain areas that can lend themselves to intensive cropping areas, but there are other areas that are marginal cropping areas and considered pastoral areas to a fair degree. So the mix just cannot change automatically*.

The option of moving sheep to a different part of the farm was also mentioned, along with an explanation of why it might not be feasible: *It's easy to say, well if you've got a dingo nearby, move your sheep. But as you know, there's a bit involved in moving your sheep. There's costs, all these sorts of things. There's costs in everything. — Yeah, well like it's been pretty dry till last week, so some of those farmers mightn't have the option to shift the sheep. The feed's in that area and they've got to tide it through till it grows somewhere else*.

Farmers' relationship with government

Trust

Many participants expressed a lack of faith or trust in government. This lack of trust had several dimensions. The first dimension involved a feeling of having been misled in the past and not wanting to be misled again. They described having cooperated with government by providing samples or information in good faith only to find it has been used in a way contrary to their expectations, usually to their detriment: *Can I just say something? I think we've actually been led to believe, that we were doing the right thing by sending all our samples and stuff in. Unbeknown to us, there was some authority somewhere else, had other ideas about what was happening and didn't tell us. And all of a sudden they're dingoes ... Somebody in the other authorities have actually got the information that we've sent in and used it to our detriment*.

For some participants, withdrawal of their cooperation was described as though it was a way to treat government the way they felt government had treated them: *We never report the dog numbers, because we've gone through this process of the DNA and supplying the DNA and doing all the right*

thing, and guess what, it's come back and hit us in the face. — And … we were doing exactly what you said. And what happened? So now you'll never know what's going on.

At one point in the Yanac group we laid out a map to ask participants to point out areas they were describing. This was regarded with suspicion that any information they added to the map might be used against them: *I've just got a little bit of a problem with the map coming out, you come to ask us what you can help us with, and then another bloke will turn up, I don't know where all our weeds are … And they give us [an order] to control weeds and everything. We've been down that track that we've been led up the garden path and we're sick of that, so we don't want any more of that going on*.

Another piece of perceived deception came a few days before the removal of the Unprotection Order: *Somebody knew what was going to happen, because when I had an attack on the 8th of March, I did what I was supposed to do and I rang Mildura … I was told there's a decision pending and we can't do anything … And so the decision made on the 14th, somebody knew somewhere what was going to happen, because that was the other part of it that really pissed me off. That's happened under the old rules and I still wasn't allowed to use that previous management plan that still existed at that point, because there'd been no decision made, but I was told that we can't do anything … And then the decision comes out on the 14th – unprotected. So there was a whole week there that we could have actually trapped dogs. — So you can understand why the trust isn't there? — They stopped us doing what we were legally allowed to do at that point for a week, which would have largely fixed my problems*.

The second dimension of lack of trust in government arose because the Unprotection Order had been withdrawn with no consultation. This was the first question asked in our first group session, after only one DEECA person had introduced themselves: *Do the government listen to you? Because we've got a problem here, so they've unprotected the dogs. You're actually behind the 8-ball, because the problem has been made without consultation and now it looks like you've been sent here to consult with us, but how do we change the decision that's been made?*. The people most directly affected heard about the change indirectly: *The decision came in overnight. Everyone was blindsided. No one knew. It was on the radio we heard it. I heard it on the radio. Then it was like, well what do we do now? No-one knew*. Even when we went to them to talk and listen, some farmers said that what we were doing was still not enough: *I find it quite strange that the people that put this through aren't accountable for the policy change and they should come out and talk to us*.

Several participants suggested the decision was political: *We've had a political decision made, where the most affected stakeholders' opinion wasn't even considered.* However, there was some appreciation in the groups that we had gone to listen to them: *Before you turn that [recorder] off I'd like to thank you people for coming out here and at least listening … I hope something does come of it. [I fear] not much is going to happen*.

The third dimension of lack of trust in government arose though scepticism about the research that had been cited as the reason for removing the Unprotection Order. Participants felt variously that it was poorly conducted, not independent and did not align with existing data:

- *That is a massive spread, between 40 and 230. How can you make a decision on such a vast number? That's like me going to my sale agent, and going, I think I've got 40 sheep, oh no, hang on, there's 230 there … how can whoever the powers that be turn around and say, well you're not allowed to control them anymore, because there's only 40 … but hang on, there*

might be 230 of them … I just find it frustrating that people can make decisions from an office desk in Melbourne based upon a number that big.

- *You're talking data, now the dog trappers were monitored heavily for the last 10 years, there must be data of how many dogs are trapped. So does that match up with the low numbers that you're using to push these arguments across the line?*

The fourth dimension of lack of trust in government involved reporting of dingo incidents. Several participants felt reporting would not help them and may even harm them:

- *Even by reporting it, it's still not going to change the policy that you can do anything with the dogs … have you ever seen them go backwards on a policy? … if I get an attack and I see a dog, if you want me to report that dog, I can report that dog, but you're going to be having cameras up on the farm next week, because you damn well know I'm going to deal with that bloody dog. If I see that dog it's dead. The only way you're not going to put a camera up there is if you don't know*.

One participant did describe a benefit of reporting dingo incidents: *Keep it honest, fair dinkum reporting, reporting that you – if you can evidence it, photos, or whatever. … Back in about '86 ... the Victorian government [wanted] a ban on steel jaw traps in Victoria and they had the legislation all written out, I happened to see it and [provided] the dogs that had been caught, the real figures, [to a local MP and he] got it changed … At that time, there was no problem in the northwest. They didn't even know that dogs existed there. We had to prove to them it was dogs here, otherwise we would have had steel jaw traps banned back in 86 or something. So the reporting, do keep it up, it might help in the end product somewhere down the line*.

The fifth dimension of lack of trust in government by farmers concerned their inability to obtain Authority to Control Wildlife permits for dingoes. The farmers said they had been told they could apply for a permit. One farmer, who had applied for a permit, said it was a frustrating process: *The bottom line [of the letter I received] says "I'm satisfied on the balance of the property that one or multiple dingoes are the cause of your livestock deaths and that you have undertaken a number of reasonable actions in the short term to avoid the lethal control of a dog, however, I must balance this with my obligation under the … Wildlife Act 1975. The scientific advice before me is clear that this population of dingoes is on the verge of extinction and because of its population size, isolation, and lack of genetic diversity, the removal of even one dingo could have significant negative implications on the population's survival. For this reason, your application for authority to control wildlife for lethal control is refused."*. [Could they help you fix it?] *Absolutely, they could give a subsidy on the fencing. Pay 50% of the fence, because it's a boundary with the land they own and … manage. Because let's be honest, apart from the fire break, what wildlife management do they actually do in there?* Other farmers had observed these difficulties and worried that they would not receive a permit either: *How many sheep have to die before you can get a permit for a dog?*

Sharing the burden

In addition to trust issues impinging on participants' relations with government, there were also issues around how to share the burden imposed by the policy change. Several participants suggested they

were bearing all the costs of the decision to remove the Unprotection Order but receiving almost none of the benefits.

- *Well it's our farm, but they have the power to make the rules, so we can't change the rules. If they now decide we can't use lethal means to control those dogs we can't. Like that's just – they would say they're governing for the benefit of the whole community and we're just the poor people that have to bear the entire costs of the decision*.
- *It disappoints me to say that the animal welfare, as in sheep, is less important than the welfare of a dingo*.

There was a feeling that if the public (as represented by government) were going to benefit from the policy change then the public had a responsibility to contribute to the much greater cost of alternative control measures:

- *Are they scared they're going to be extinct or something?* [Yes. That's exactly right.] *Well why don't they put up a fence? Take this small dog gene pool and breed in their fence and keep them off our property*.
- *When they said this genetic pool is so rare it's going to get extinct, you've got to understand, if they're going to say that they've got to put their wheels on the ground. What are they doing to protect those 40 dogs?* .

The general feeling was that those who benefitted from the policy change should pay for the costs of managing under the new arrangements:

- *I think the people who want to preserve this need to foot the bill for inclusion fencing*.
- *I mean if they're dingoes and you want to protect them, then why do we have to pay for them? It doesn't make any sense. It's like it makes you people feel good, but we have to pay for every cent of it*.

The cost of exclusion fencing (the only non-lethal dingo control option participants felt had a realistic chance of being effective) was seen as substantial, and the farmers said they could not afford it:

- *A 50% [fencing] subsidy, like I said, we're still talking $7,500 a km. The farmer has to pay. — But you shouldn't need a 50% subsidy if it's fencing that the government puts up on their land. To look after their livestock so that they don't damage our livestock. — It's either that or give us our 3km buffer zone back. That's what we need to push for. Because we don't sit here and say well the government's not going to let us do that. We're there to demand that. Because they brought in the rules*.
- *You've got to help people out with fencing, you can't just say, well you can't shoot, but you've got to put a fence up.* [Is money the only thing that will help or are there other things that will help with fencing?] *Exclusion fencing is bloody dear. — Yeah, and what style do you go for? Yeah … I think you've got to have the skirt on the bottom, because they dig under. Then the netting keeps the rabbits out — and then you've got ringlock.* [Would a demonstration site help?] *Yes. Well that gets back to picking a site and running proper data on it. Because my idea is, you have a block fenced, a block not fenced. Both monitored. — With cameras. — Yeah, so you can actually see what happens. That sort of thing. You know, a runner fence. See if that channels them down somewhere else, or whatever. Just more data. If that was the one thing I'd ask you for is more data*.

Compensation of farmers for their stock losses was mentioned but it was seen more as a fall-back option than the preferred option of a fencing subsidy: *Compensation is an after-the-event problem. Fix the problem and you don't even have to talk about compensation*.

Participants said they had to keep their own animals out of crown land but they felt the government did little to stop what they saw as the government's animals coming out of crown land onto their property:

- *So over the years, you're our worst neighbours. You're our absolute worst neighbours, like deer, goats — Kangaroos, emus, they hammer our fences, it's ridiculous*.
- *By far the worst neighbour is the government. No fencing, no control, no responsibility … It's just an ongoing problem. We cover all the costs of fencing ourselves, it's a waste of time asking government for money.*

One reason given for why farmers have limited capacity to cover the cost of exclusion fencing was that voluntary organisations that could coordinate the extensive multi-farm ventures necessary for effective fencing were facing a shortage of financial and voluntary support, which was described as reducing community capacity:

- *One of our problems here is that we don't have any facilitator money at all for our Landcare Group, we pay for our own facilitator out of our own income … the amount of effort put into writing grants and the expertise required to do that churns through a lot of money and capacity within the group. And the farmers as well, the farmers also have to contribute to that. And it's just dead time*.

The extra effort now being required of leaders of voluntary community organisations was described as making it difficult to recruit volunteers.

Legal issues

Some participants spoke about the animal welfare responsibilities placed on farmers and contrasted them with what they saw as government not taking responsibility for attacks on their stock by animals for which government was responsible: *The law states that if we don't use pain relief to castrate and deal with sheep, you can be prosecuted by the government. Yet the government enables an animal to come onto a farm, take no responsibility to rip an animal to pieces, not to do a procedure which is for the benefit of the animal, but the purpose is for a bit of fun and to kill it. The government is legally responsible for animal abuse and they should be prosecuted for it.*

In some groups the issue of interstate differences in dingo policy and management was raised. This was seen as a curiosity and a mild complicating factor, rather than a point of bargaining: *In South Australia, over the border, they had a dog attack last night, all neighbours have gone to put poison baits out the next day. All the neighbours, and they get that dog and everyone's got to bait*.

Other animals

Participants were asked about other animals they did not want on their farms. The most commonly discussed were rabbits, foxes, kangaroos and emus. A few other animals were mentioned occasionally.

Rabbits

The groups talked about rabbits more than any other animal that was not a dingo. The consensus was that rabbits had been a big problem but were now being well managed through coordinated activities. However, several institutional barriers to effective rabbit control were described.

Two main controls for rabbits were described, poisoning and biological controls, and these were generally praised for their effectiveness:

- *We had a big, big problem with rabbits … The 1080 bait is an essential part of managing the rabbit situation in this area… — The Calici helps, the Myxo too*.
- *1080 carrots are magnificent for rabbits*.

Effective rabbit control was described as requiring persistence: *Rabbits are starting to breed up now, probably 10 years I reckon we haven't had them around the sheds and they're just starting to see a few now … — We bait every year, not seeing major issues. — I thought we'd never get rid of rabbits, but it shows that if you work on them you certainly keep them right down.* One participant, who undertook ripping of rabbit burrows on a contract basis, warned of the danger of complacency: *[With] younger farmers now on the farm, they kind of see the rabbit ripping as a waste of money type of a thing, because they haven't been through when the rabbits were really bad*.

A coordinated approach to rabbit control was also described as beneficial: *You probably don't know this, but our Landcare group has been the most active group in Victoria for controlling rabbits with the programmes we've done for 50 years or more … we get the grants and we rip burrows. And we do a 1080 programme every year and it includes foxes*.

One group described the current formulation of 1080 as less effective than previous formulations: *They're doing less rabbit control now with the 1080 than ever. Because it's not... 1080 comes in a bucket full of slush. Rabbits won't eat it.* Another group warned of the risks of collateral damage unless 1080 baiting locations were chosen carefully, saying sheep can dig up baited carrots and eat them and end up poisoning themselves.

The groups described several institutional barriers to rabbit control. Most concerned poisoning, but some were about ripping or shooting. These included:

- No longer being allowed to mix their own baits: *We were stopped. The Victorian government decided that we couldn't get carrots from the carrot farm – and they sponsor our Landcare Group – we can't get carrots, chop them ourselves and have the poison put on them in a designated shed, which was built by the Department. So it's a poisoning shed, we're not allowed to use that in Ouyen, because it's 300m from the hospital and the old people might climb over the chain fence and eat a carrot. And so we have to buy diced carrots from Animal Industries Australia in Melbourne*.

- Not being allowed to remove vegetation to rip warrens: *We're not allowed to clear the vegetation so that we can destroy the burrow. So you've got two government departments fighting against one another and it just doesn't work. — We're not allowed to bait on the road any more … When we do our baiting it's a different time when the shire do the roads*.
- A government requirement to rip warrens on public land to a maximum depth that was described as ineffective: *The research quite clearly shows that the department has the data, which shows that if you rip less than 800 mm deep, which is pretty much a metre, the efficacy of the ripping is about 50% or less than ripping from 900 mm to a metre deep. Yet the department and Parks only allow ripping in public land at 500 mm.*
- Not being allowed to poison in road reserves: *We can't poison within 50m of that roadside. We have to poison inside our netting fence. But the rabbits are on the road, so if you put the carrots on the road, you'll be prosecuted. … So the rabbits are the government's rabbits, but we're not allowed to poison them on the roads, we have to poison inside our property*.
- Unclear demarcation of land tenure boundaries (in this case between railway land and road reserve): *No one can determine where their boundaries are. So they say, oh no, we don't own the railway line to the fence. Well, you talk to all the older farmers around here, like 80+, and they're like, nah, they run from there to the fence, that's how it was when it all got put through*.
- Being forced to use expensive control methods close to towns: *The most significant rabbit population I've got is the properties that adjoin town. I can't bait, I can't shoot, because of the proximity to the town scaring domestic animals. I'm left to ripping and gassing close to town, which is time-consuming and very labour intensive*.

Not being allowed to bait for rabbits in towns was described as not only a matter of legal licence but also social licence: *Rabbits up the main street and we can't control them.* [So why can't you bait in town?] *It's illegal. — We can't go shooting in town. It's frowned upon. — …* [There's only restrictions on how far you need to be from a public amenity, so a school, a hospital –] *No. Water points, town water supply, all that sort of stuff, we're not allowed to bait within there.* And if you laid baits in a town area where you were allowed to: *As soon as you put up a 1080 sign on a property where there's someone not on board with the program, you're open to abusive phone calls*.

Some groups described what they saw as a role for different levels of government in rabbit control and monitoring:

- *It would be nice to see some government action on the already vermin issue, being rabbits. You know.* [What sort of action are you thinking of?] *Well the department coming out to rip roadsides. Annually. That's very effective, it's been proven, many times. And it just doesn't happen any more, there's the shire, local councils, supposed to be responsible for controlling the rabbit vermin situation on the roadside and it's minimal effort*.
- *So the best people to monitor things like rabbits and that is the local council, because local council employees do go down every road of every council area, so the state government doesn't know or care what's going on in our area*.

Foxes

The other introduced pest commonly discussed in the groups was foxes: *Foxes are certainly a problem at this time, at lambing. They're certainly a big problem*. Fox control was often seen as a by-product of effective rabbit control: *The 1080 helps kill the rabbits but also kills quite a few foxes as well. Because they eat the rabbits that were killed by the 1080*.

Although the state was described as a poor neighbour several times during the sessions, it was sometimes described as a good neighbour: *So we border the Little Desert National Park and they would do two 1080 programmes there a year. We have less trouble at the Little Desert with foxes than anywhere else*.

Some suggestions were made about improving fox control. One was that the government could pay for baits rather than spending money on a fox bounty: *You're talking about the $10 for the foxes, let me tell you what would be far better than having the $10 for a set of fox ears, is actually giving out free 1080 baits for people to go and kill foxes. On a larger scale, massive scale. Because at the $10 stuff, all you're doing is paying a bit of ammo for people to go and shoot more. But when I do my 40 [baits] and I do it around the property, I take all the foxes out. Not [just] the ones you can shoot, I get all the clever ones, because you pull a trail of something dead, stinking sheep, put the trail down, every km you put a fox bait and bury it. And that fox will come along and run down there and you'll kill him every time. And so you can devastate foxes … So when you want to get really serious, fox baits, the government, if they want to get serious of killing foxes, give us the money to subsidise it*.

Another suggestion was for government to broker links between farmers and fox hunters. The sample given was a list of farmers who were willing to have a local hunter come onto their property to shoot foxes.

Kangaroos and emus

Apart from dingoes, the two native animals that were most often discussed as presenting problems for the farmers were kangaroos and emus. Kangaroos were considered to be present in large and sometimes increasing numbers. Actual numbers of emus were not discussed.

Both kangaroos and emus were described as causing damage to fences:

- *The kangaroos and the emus smash our fences and drill the holes under the fences*.
- *Kangaroos, they cause the [fence] maintenance, because they want to come out. So the kangaroos have got to come out for food and water. Because there's nothing in the park for them*.

Holes created in fences by kangaroos and emus were described as allowing dingoes to enter farms.

Where kangaroos were seen as competing with farm livestock for grazing, emus were described as causing damage through trampling crops:

- *Emus are probably worse than the kangaroos, because they are a problem at harvest or pre-harvest times when they just trample and run and play with their young, and so they don't eat much, but they knock crops down*.
- *Emus will come through our crop to get to the water*.

Other animals

Participants mentioned several other animals they didn't want on their farm, but none of them were as important as the ones already discussed. These animals included:

- Snails: *Snails … Well they eat the crop and as the weather gets hotter they get off the ground, climb up the stalk and then you harvest it and the grain sort of has receival standards on how many broken snails... [and] they turn your header into slime*.
- Wallabies: *40 years ago there wasn't a wallaby out here … they've been dumped out here I think. — The first wallabies arrived with sheep ear tags in their ears*.
- Goats: *When the goats were quite bad, 10, probably 15 years ago, there was a local guy who was trapping them. They'd come into water and he was selling them. He was doing quite well out of it. But I must admit, we got on top of the numbers, now I've been aware that there's been a couple of helicopters come in and they've shot and it's had a big impact on the goats*.
- Pigs: described as opening up silo bags.
- Deer
- Mice
- Pigeons in grain silos and sheds.

The future

Participants were asked how Agriculture Victoria might support them in future pest management endeavours. They were asked about various pieces of research and operational work and suggested other possibilities.

Tracking dingoes to better understand their behaviour and movement

Not long before our focus groups were held, the National Wild Dog Management Coordinator had visited the Big Desert area and held public meetings with local farmers. He suggested a program of research that involved catching dingoes, attaching radio collars to them and tracking their movements. Some of our groups discussed this suggestion and were generally favourable toward it: *That's where you can use the collar … I reckon that information would be useful, because it would fill in a few gaps and give you a few options, perhaps … You could work out when you relocate them whether it is permanent … how much time did they spend … wandering around? — Yeah, their range, how big it is? — They might not be killer dogs, they might just be wandering around, but how much do they come out of the park. So there's a few gaps to fill in I reckon*.

The favour with which participants regarded this potential research work contrasted with the scientific research about dingo genetics and population size, which was widely distrusted. Several benefits of this proposal were described in the groups. One view was that farmers would be able to play a role in guiding the research, and that it might vindicate their own views about dingo behaviour: *This is the sort of frustration we have with government ignoring the facts of what research shows and this is – I'm all for collaring the dogs, and measuring it and proving that the dogs do not stay in the parks and that they travel much further than we think they do, but it has to be acted on the correct way, and not like they've done with rabbit ripping. And ignore the facts*.

Another view was that if – as they suspected – a single dog was found to be mounting a spate of attacks, this would give them some chance of having that dog lethally controlled. This view also included the belief that farmers and government would be more likely to achieve a workable outcome by cooperating and collaborating: *We have to do something. — You like 'em we don't like 'em, we can argue forever about that. But we've got to protect our stock.* [And we want to help you.] *We've got to make a living and obviously you lot are making a living looking after wild dogs, you get paid by the government, so it's less of a concern to you. But the more we work together the better off we'll be.*

One benefit of this research that was mentioned was that it would provide the local Wild Dog Controller with useful work. Participants were keen to retain the skills of the local Wild Dog Controller in the region.

Capturing local wild dog and dingo knowledge

It was suggested that there were local people with a large amount of knowledge of dingo behaviour, gathered over many years of trapping them, and that this knowledge should be collected and preserved.

1080 training

The prospect of Agriculture Victoria arranging for local training in the use of 1080 was discussed in several the groups. The general view seemed to be that, while many locals had the 1080 endorsements on their Agricultural Chemical User Permits, there were enough people who did not hold the endorsement to make it worthwhile holding training sessions. Barriers identified to 1080 training included needing to travel to Horsham to undertake it, the loss of 1080-trained staff due to normal staff turnover meaning that training is required frequently, and the fact that training is generally offered only on an irregular or infrequent basis.

Regional advisory committee

The prospect of a regional advisory committee for pests was raised by Agriculture Victoria staff in several sessions. There was support for this idea, though the support was quiet rather than enthusiastic.

Water provision

Because of the lack of water sources within the park, dingoes were described as coming out of the park to drink from water supplied by farmers for their stock. In some groups this led to a discussion about possibly providing access to water in the park. Opinions of the benefit of providing water in the park were divided. Some thought it would help with dingo management: *[Kangaroos] need water, put it out there. Put it out in the middle of the park … You need the soaks out in the middle of the park*

where they used to be, so the animals will stay out there and not come to us. And that means wild dogs as well.

More participants expressed concern about this idea than were in favour, however. Several people considered it would upset the ecology of the park and lead to over-abundance of some animals:

- *If I extrapolate that on the way we manage pastoral systems in the north, so if we want to increase carrying capacity of a station, we alter the water points. So what effectively you'd be doing there is increasing the dog population within the parks*.
- *If you put water out there, you're going to alter the ecology of the place in ways that we probably won't comprehend here yet until we see it*.
- *They stopped the water up in Sunset [Country], they closed all the dams. — Because it wasn't natural.* [Yeah.] *So I don't really want to see artificial water sources put down in the scrub here. — Because you're going to remove your natural removal of animals when they die in a drought*.

Other suggestions

Participants also suggested other ways Agriculture Victoria might support them:

- Exclusion fencing demonstration sites
- A service that matched fox shooters with farmers

Participants also expressed a desire for local kangaroo processing facilities such as chillers or even an abattoir, which would encourage shooters, but this was not directed specifically at Agriculture Victoria.

Discussion and conclusion

Many focus group participants expressed distrust in government, with the lack of consultation prior to removal of the Unprotection Order often cited as a reason. Distrust was greatest in areas where dingo predation on sheep had recently occurred or was currently occurring. Although those who had current or recent experience of predation were outspoken about their frustration, their concern was often amplified by others in the groups without current or recent predation experience. This suggests that worry about possible predation is as much a driver of concern about dingo predation than the predation itself. Much was made in the groups about the random nature of the predation.

Other factors built on this basic distrust of government to create a web of distrust. These included a perceived lack of fair dealing by government (having information they had provided used against them and being told they could apply for an Authority to Control Wildlife but knowing they would never receive one), and a distrust of the pieces of research cited as the reasons for the withdrawal of the unprotection order.

The farmers varied greatly in their response to the withdrawal of the unprotection order. Most expressed anger and a small number were resigned to not being able to undertake lethal control again. Some explored the possibility of a variety of compromises involving limited lethal control options. There was a widespread feeling that a small number of animals was causing the majority of the harm and culling these animals would benefit farmers greatly while making minimal difference to dingo population numbers.

Participants were generally in favour of a program of research that involved catching dingoes, attaching radio collars to them and tracking their movements. This had been suggested by the National Wild Dog Management Coordinator recently. The general feeling was that it would increase cooperation between farmers and government and thereby increase the likelihood of pragmatic and useful outcomes, particularly if the research vindicated farmers' understanding of dingo behaviour.

There was considerable support for the Wild Dog Management Program, including the local Wild Dog Controller. Participants were keen to retain a Wild Dog Controller in the area, even if he was no longer able to undertake lethal control of wild dogs, and they saw the potential tracking research as a way to keep him gainfully employed on wild dog management in the area.

Although the farmers were willing to discuss their issues with other pest animals, clearly the animal causing the greatest concern to them was the dingo. Any animal-focused program in north-west Victoria will need to focus a lot of attention on management of dingoes.

Although they were frustrated by the sudden removal of a program they felt was working well, the north-west farmers we talked to were willing to work with government to explore options for dingo control and management. They felt, however, that government had so far shouldered none of the burden and should now make a much greater contribution on behalf of the entire Victorian public.

Appendix: running sheet

Round robin. First, government staff explain their role in government, their work location and why they are there. Then farmers describe their farm, its location, the balance of livestock and crops, and the nature of any livestock operation.

Are pest animals affecting your farming operation in any way? Which animals? How are they affecting you?

IF DINGOES OR WILD DOGS MENTIONED *(what do we do if farmers call them wild dogs?)*:

> What have you been doing to control dingoes? How well has it worked? Explore lethal and non-lethal methods (e.g., exclusion fencing, guardian animals, deterrents)
>
> Explain withdrawal of unprotection order and reasons why *(needs to be done by someone with some responsibility for the decision so they can explain it with passion and authority)*
>
> How does this change affect you? Does it make any difference to you?
>
> What things do you think Agriculture Victoria can do to help you manage dingoes?

Can we broaden the focus now to all pest animals in this area.

How have you been managing or controlling pest animals (other than dingoes)? What things are you doing to manage them? Is it working? Explore lethal and non-lethal methods (e.g., exclusion fencing, guardian animals, deterrents)

IF DINGOES NOT MENTIONED: Explain withdrawal of unprotection order and reasons why *(for groups where dingo predation is less of a problem, this can be done by someone less involved with the change)*

> How does this change affect you? Does it make any difference to you?

Explain the new project and its multi-species focus, including what other agencies are doing

Does this sound like something that would help you to manage pest animals? Can you think of anything that would make it better?

What other things do you think Agriculture Victoria can do to help you manage the pest animals that affect your farm?

Are there any other agencies that you need help from to manage pest animals?

If Agriculture Victoria were to run some demonstration sites, where would be the best places round here to put them? How many should there be?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about managing pest animals on your own farm or in this district?

Wrap up. Thanks. Next steps.