

Feral Pig Control Plan for the Lower Ord Ramsar Site 2011-2012




Rangelands NRM
Western Australia



*This project is an initiative of the
Rangelands NRM Coordinating
Group and funded by the
Australian Governments.*



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Background:

Feral pigs are environmental and agricultural pests. They cause damage to the environment through wallowing, rooting for food and selective feeding. They destroy crops and pasture, as well as habitat for native plants and animals. They spread environmental weeds and could spread exotic diseases should there be an outbreak. Predation, habitat degradation, competition and disease transmission by feral pigs was listed as a key threatening process under section 168 of the EPBC Act in 2002. In Western Australia, feral pigs are declared pests under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976*,

History:

Domestic pigs were brought to Australia at the time of European settlement as a food source, and were transported around the country by 19th century settlers. Initially, the pigs that escaped or were allowed to wander were associated with human habitation, but truly feral colonies eventually became established. Their spread is mainly along watercourses and floodplains is not well documented, but by the 1880s, feral pigs reached such numbers that they were considered a pest in parts of New South Wales.

Pigs have been reported along river systems in the Kimberley region of Western Australia since the 1890s and numbers have increased since that time. There has been a small but increasing population spread along the Ord River upstream of the Lower Ord Ramsar site for a number of years focussed on and around communities on Lake Kununurra and the Ord River Irrigation Area.

Ecology:

Because they need to drink daily in hot weather, feral pigs are not found in the dry inland. In hot weather, they are usually found within two kilometres of water with densities varying depending on conditions. Numbers of up to 10-20 per kilometre square can exist in wetlands and seasonally inundated floodplains such as areas within the Lower Ord Ramsar site. Feral pigs are active from late afternoon to early morning. They eat a wide range of foods including plants and small animals, and they will scavenge on dead animals.

Adult male feral pigs (boars) generally roam alone over an area of up to 43 kilometres square, while females (sows) range over areas smaller than 20 kilometres square. During dry conditions, groups of up to 100 pigs may gather around waterholes. Feral pigs can breed from the age of 7-12 months, and usually produce one or two litters of about six piglets each year. Many piglets are lost to dingoes and wild dogs, starvation and loss of contact with their mother. This rapid reproductive rate, similar to rabbits, can increase a population by up to 86 per cent each year in ideal conditions.

Impact:

Environmental damage caused by feral pigs is caused by the animal wallowing and rooting around the edges of watercourses and swamps, they destroy the vegetation that prevents erosion and provides food and nesting sites for native wildlife. They compete with native animals for food, pose a threat to ground-nesting birds, and can spread environmental weeds. Feral pigs have destroyed breeding sites and degraded key habitats of a number of significant species in Australia.

Feral pigs can be a serious agricultural pest. They cause losses of an estimated 20,000 tonnes of sugarcane each year. In some areas, they kill and eat up to 40 per cent of newborn lambs. A control program at Packsaddle destroyed a number of pigs damaging fruit crops in 2009.

Feral pigs are hosts for pathogens such as brucellosis and leptospirosis, and could also carry diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease, African swine fever and rabies, should those diseases be accidentally introduced into Australia.

Recognised Control Methods:

A number of techniques are available to control feral pigs. In open country, mustering and shooting from helicopters can be effective in the short term, shooting from the ground is considered to only be effective in small accessible populations. They can be controlled using poison grain or meat baits, usually with compound 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate) however local native bird and animal species are particularly susceptible to 1080 poison unlike those in the south western part of Western Australia.

Traps baited with grain, fruit or meat can be used to control feral pigs. Traps are built near areas where pigs are active, such as watering holes. Land-holders often leave traps erected permanently, but only activating the gate when pig activity is evident.

Which ever method of control is used, the feral pig's rapid breeding cycle often results in rapid population recovery following control activity.

Local Mapping:

In 2010 data was collected from local residents and in particular local pig hunters to determine where pig populations exist and have existed in the past. This was pulled together to produce a map (See Map 1) to assist with locating control points.

Local Control Strategies:

It was decided from the mapping information to begin control north of Crossing Falls and move it south onto Maxwell Plan as pigs were controlled.

Due to previous reported deaths of native animals around the Crossing Falls area in 2009 and the proximity of pig populations to the rural-residential area on consultation with local residents an undertaking was made to use trapping only to control pig numbers. The following methodology was to be employed -

- Traps to be 100mm mesh at least 1.5 metres high to prevent escapees and possible injury to the pig.
- Traps to be large enough to hold pigs comfortably until they are destroyed.
- Traps to be checked every 12 hours when baited and activated
- Traps to have a supply of fresh water within them.
- Meat baits only to be used in areas where wallabies and kangaroos could be inadvertently trapped.
- Destruction of the pigs is to be carried out by authorised personnel.
- A licence to use native animals killed by vehicles on roads may be required from the Department of Environment and Conservation.

Map 1

