



# **Strategic Plan**

## **2021 – 2025**

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Over a century of success maintaining the rabbit-proof fence and protecting Queensland's economy and environment from the impacts of rabbits, confirmed by modern, scientific research

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*Revised 20 June 2024*

## Foreword

The Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Board (DDMRB) has been in existence in one form or another for 130 years. Our role in protecting Queensland's agricultural productivity and environmental values is as important today as it was in the 1890s.

So much of our productive and natural landscapes have changed since then, but the impacts of rabbits, or the threat of their resurgence has remained constant. The rabbit fence has stood for 120 years, creating a physical and strategic barrier preventing the establishment of rabbits in Queensland at levels seen in the southern States. The introduction of biological controls have seen plague-like rabbit populations crash, only to once again flourish thanks to the unique ecology of the rabbit and its ability to breed, adapt and survive. We have learnt that the most effective way to control rabbits is to destroy their warrens and remove their harbour. There is no silver bullet and we continue to educate and encourage land managers to adopt these best practice methods.

We know from scientific research that the fence continues to work and we know biological controls are vitally important. Similarly, a regulatory compliance framework that places responsibility on all land managers to control wild rabbits on their land, and that prohibits the ownership of pet rabbits is critical.

These three factors hold the key to ensuring the impacts of rabbits are suppressed in the DDMRB area and beyond in Queensland.

1. The rabbit fence must be maintained in a rabbit proof condition, in its current extent, noting its importance where rabbit pressure is high and its strategic value as an insurance policy where rabbit pressure is currently low, but would see a resurgence should any or all of these other factors be allowed to decline.
2. Continued funding into biological control research must be assured. History tells us that bio-controls can work extremely well, but also that rabbits have the capacity to overcome them.
3. Continued support from all levels of government is needed to ensure a contemporary regulatory compliance framework is in place. Land managers, regardless of the tenure of their land must be held to account and assisted to remove rabbits where they exist. This must be backed by best practice control measures. The risks posed by ownership of pet rabbits must be acknowledged and countered by unwavering support for the prohibition on pet rabbit ownership.

Like the Boards that have gone before us, we are committed to ensuring the impacts of rabbits in South East Queensland and beyond are kept to a minimum and that we do so through the effective delivery of operational and strategic plans. We acknowledge the support of our partner local governments and strive to provide value for money in our operations and transparency and collaboration in our approach. The rabbit is arguably Australia's most damaging invasive pest and effective partnerships are needed to continue to successfully manage its impacts.

Cr Janice Holstein



**Chair**

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## Introduction

### History of Rabbits

The European Rabbit arrived in Australia with the first fleet in 1788 and extensive feral populations had established in Tasmania by 1827. Twenty-four rabbits arrived on mainland Australia in 1859 and by 1866 they had become a significant problem for landholders in Victoria and South Australia. By 1900 rabbits had spread to Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The rate of advance varied from 10 to 15 kilometres per year, but deliberate releases assisted the rapid spread of rabbits to all states in Australia. The spread of rabbits throughout Australia was the fastest rate of any colonising mammal anywhere in the world.

### The Threat

Rabbits cost the Australian economy and environment (natural and built) \$2 billion annually (Bradshaw et al, 2021). They compete with native animals, destroy the landscape, cause erosion by preventing the regeneration of native vegetation, reduce pasture availability for livestock, and impact on predator numbers. Therefore rabbits pose a constant threat to the sustainability of our natural resources and the economic viability of highly productive agricultural land. Rabbits have been listed by the Australian Government Department of Environment and Heritage as a “key threatening process”.

### Creation of the Darling Downs–Moreton Rabbit Board

When rabbits first reached Queensland from the southern States in the 1880s, a fence was quickly constructed along the border in an attempt to keep them out. Unfortunately, the rabbits had already invaded some districts before the fence was complete. Some of the district rabbit boards had inadequate financial and technical resources to cope with the problem.

In 1930, all existing rabbit boards were abolished except for Leichhardt, Darling Downs and Moreton. In 1963 the Leichhardt Rabbit Board closed and the Darling Downs Rabbit Board took over their 80 km fence. In 1964, the two remaining boards merged to become the Darling Downs–Moreton Rabbit Board.

### Our Role

The Darling Downs–Moreton Rabbit Board (DDMRB) is an Invasive Animal Board established under the *Biosecurity Act 2014* and is responsible for maintaining the **rabbit district** (Figure 2) free of rabbits.

The DDMRB employs 15 staff to provide a rabbit control and compliance service to 8 local governments and their rate payers within the 28,000 km<sup>2</sup> rabbit district (the board’s operational area) of south east Queensland. The delivery of this service is achieved through the maintenance and upgrade of the 555km rabbit-proof fence, and the provision of expertise and technical information to assist landholders to control rabbits on their land.

The DDMRB is a statutory body of the Queensland Government under the portfolio of the Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities. The DDMRB’s operations are fully funded by local governments.

The DDMRB area is a significant part of Australia encompassing a substantially sized, highly productive agricultural area that is ideal for rabbits, but has not yet suffered the impact of large numbers of rabbits. The value of horticultural and cereal crop production in the area exceeds one billion dollars per annum. Outside the DDMRB area, plants and animals experienced incredibly high grazing pressure from rabbits particularly up until myxomatosis arrived.

Fox and feral cat numbers are generally highest where there are rabbits and these introduced predators have caused considerable damage to native small mammal populations. By keeping rabbits out, the DDMRB has probably protected native animals from introduced predators. We suspect there are more healthy populations of native mammals in the DDMRB area, and to the north east of the area, because rabbits have been prevented from establishing properly.

The value to agriculture of keeping rabbits out is considerable and has been estimated to be many millions of dollars per year. Although rabbit infestations are discovered within the DDMRB area they have not been allowed to properly establish large warren systems. Without large warren systems in Queensland, rabbit populations are unlikely to survive.

DDMRB’s role can be considered one of *prevention*, as it relates to the economics of the biosecurity invasion curve (Figure 1). The extent to which rabbits are established in Queensland is very low when compared to their potential distribution. Current impacts are therefore very low when compared to the impacts that would be felt should rabbits establish in Queensland to potential levels. The Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis contends that biosecurity investment should be guided by economic return (Kompas, 2023). The return on investment in preventative rabbit control is high.

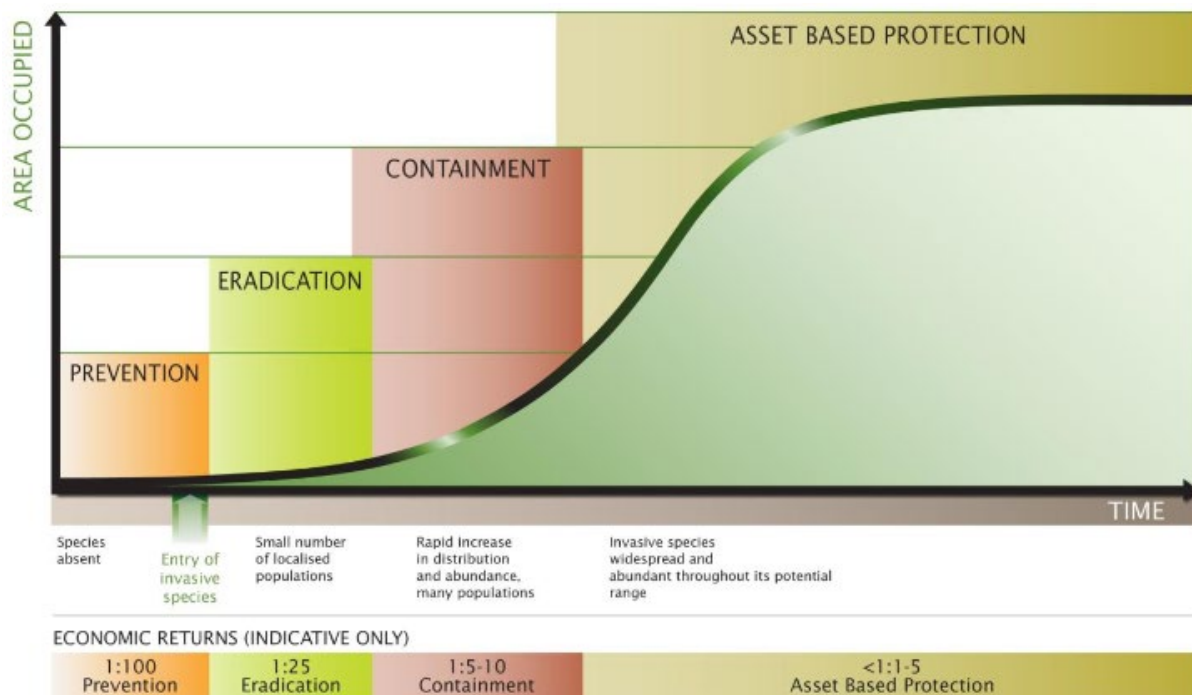


Figure 1

## Powers and responsibilities

Rabbits are restricted animals (Categories 3, 4, 5 and 6) under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*.

The Act, and the *Biosecurity Regulation 2016* (the Regulation), provides powers for the management of declared pests in Queensland. Specific provisions include powers for the DDMRB to maintain the rabbit fence, and to appoint authorised persons who in turn have the powers to inspect land, seize declared pests, and require landholders to undertake rabbit control.

## Linkages

This plan is consistent with:

- *Biosecurity Act 2014 and the Biosecurity Regulation 2016*
- *Human Rights Act 2019 – we respect, protect and promote human rights in everything we do*
- Queensland Biosecurity Strategy
- Queensland Pest Animal Strategy
- Queensland Rabbit Control Strategy
- National Threat Abatement Plan for Rabbits
- Threatened Species Action Plan 2022-2032

### **Key Stakeholders**

- Biosecurity Queensland (BQ), Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF)
- Local governments (within and adjoining the DDMRB area)
- Landholders – adjoining, and within protected area
- Regional NRM bodies
- Queensland and NSW national parks and forestry services, other agencies
- Industry organisations
- Community groups

### **Core Principles**

- DDMRB is in the business of prevention; the biosecurity approach with the greatest economic return.
- Wild or domestic European rabbits remain a major threat to the Australian economy and environment. Continued enforcement of compliance with legislation requiring their removal from land, regardless of tenure, and their ownership as pets is critical.
- The DDMRB's operational area is the premier agricultural region in Queensland.
- The ongoing commitment of DDMRB, its partners and other stakeholders is essential to protecting south east Queensland and beyond from the impacts of rabbits. This includes continued funding for research into biological controls.
- The rabbit fence remains a vital asset in providing a physical barrier to the incursion of rabbits into south east Queensland and beyond. It is also an important strategic barrier to wild dogs and other invasive animals.
- The DDMRB recognises that funding is provided by ratepayers through their local governments and as such we strive to provide value for money in our operations.
- The DDMRB will respect, protect and promote human rights in its decision-making and actions.
- The DDMRB is committed to environmentally sustainable practices and has adopted an Environmental Sustainability Policy.

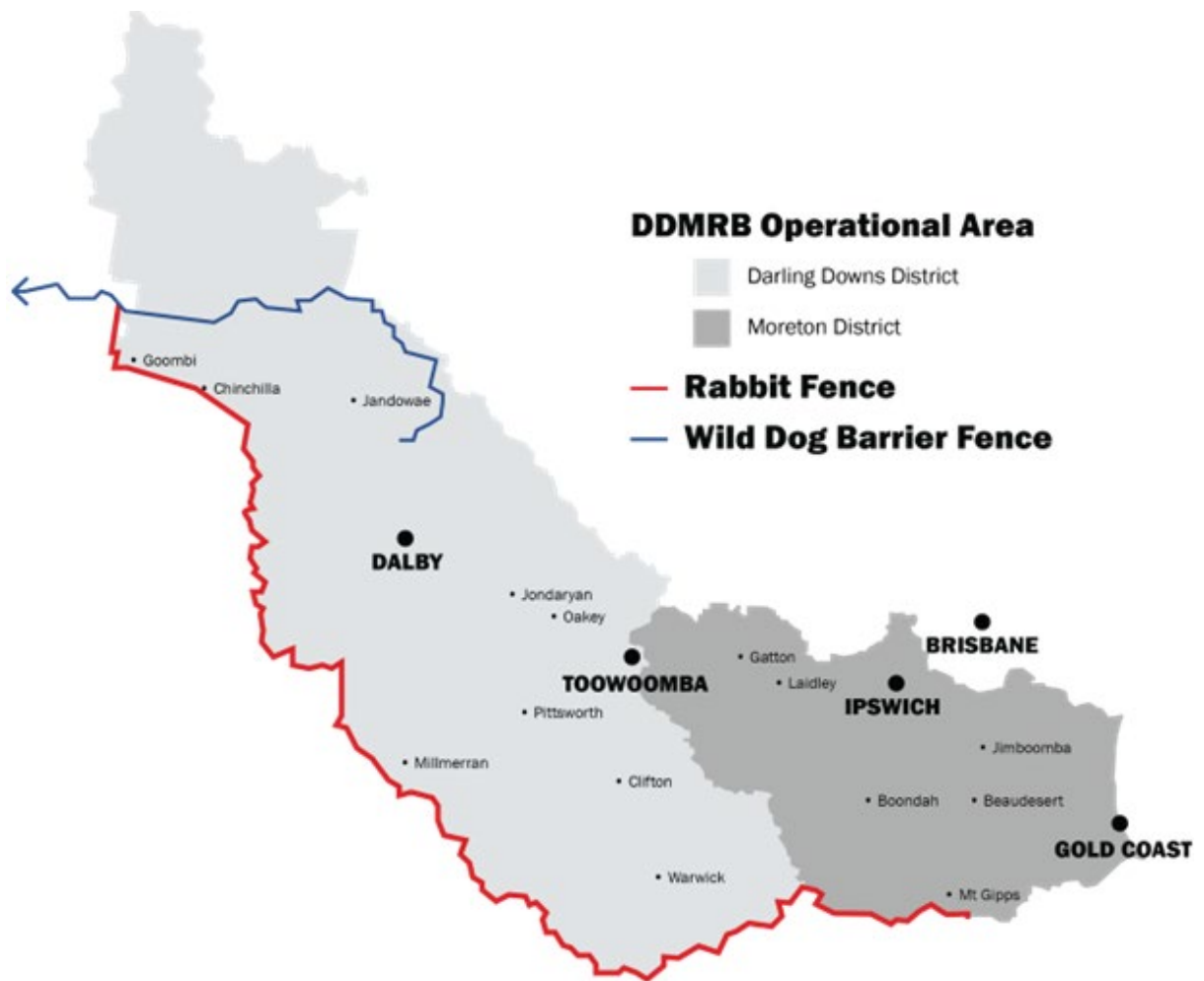


Figure 2 - DDMRB Fence & Operational Area

## Vision

Enabling our productive and natural landscapes and our residential and recreational spaces to be free from the impacts of rabbits.

## Mission

To control the impacts of rabbits by efficiently managing our assets and effectively communicating with our stakeholders.

## Agency purpose

The DDMRB plays a strategic role in reducing the spread of rabbits into and within Queensland by maintaining the rabbit fence and educating and assisting land managers to remove rabbits from their land.

## Agency objectives

1. To successfully suppress the wider environmental effects of rabbits
2. Communicate the value of the organisation that encourages consistent support from landholders, local government and other stakeholders

3. To maintain the infrastructure which has successfully mitigated the environmental and economic impact of rabbits for over 130 years

### **Queensland Government's objectives for the community**

The DDMRB supports the Government's objectives for the community:

- **Good jobs:** *Good, secure jobs in our traditional and emerging industries*
- **Better services:** *Deliver even better services right across Queensland*
- **Great lifestyle:** *Protect and enhance our Queensland lifestyle as we grow*

A range of sub-objectives sit beneath and support achievement of these objectives. Those with most relevance to the DDMRB's strategic plan are:

#### **Good Jobs**

*Supporting jobs:* *Good, secure jobs in more industries to diversify the Queensland economy and build on existing strengths in agriculture, resources and tourism.*

*The day-to-day work of DDMRB staff directly supports Queensland agriculture by safeguarding high value production areas from the impacts of rabbits.*

#### **Great Lifestyle**

*Protecting the environment:* *Protect and enhance our natural environment and heritage for future generations and achieve a 70 per cent renewable energy target by 2032 and net zero emissions by 2050.*

*The work of the DDMRB directly contributes to biodiversity protection; rabbits impact upon 322 threatened native species.*

*Growing our regions:* *Help Queensland's regions grow by attracting people, talent and investment, and driving sustainable economic prosperity.*

*DDMRB supports regional communities by maintaining its workforce in regional centres and small towns, as well as aspiring to exceed a 90% local spend rate.*

### **Timeframe**

This plan has a four year timeframe; from 2021 to 2025. It is reviewed annually, with a comprehensive review to be undertaken at least every four years. A comprehensive review was undertaken in 2022.

### **Relationship with other plans**

The strategic plan guides the actions and performance indicators of the organisation in the annual operational plan. These actions align with the strategic themes and actions in the strategic plan and largely serve to operationalise the strategic plan. There are a number of strategic actions listed in **Table 1** that do not have corresponding actions listed in the operational plan, as these are tenets of good governance. Such strategic actions have their own performance indicators listed.



## Strategies

Strategic Themes	Strategic Action Focus Areas	Performance Indicators
<b>Governance</b>	Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication channels, including regular meetings are in place to enable staff (and Directors) to be informed and have opportunity for input.</li> <li>• The Board's strategic importance is advocated to all levels of government and other stakeholders in building relationships through participation at relevant forums as opportunities arise.</li> <li>• Annual performance reviews reveal high job satisfaction levels among staff.</li> </ul>
	Risk management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risks and strategies for their mitigation are identified and regularly reviewed.</li> </ul>
	Policy & planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The policy suite is reviewed annually and as required, in response to changing legislation, risk and other relevant factors.</li> <li>• Budget, operational plan and strategic plan are regularly reviewed for achievement of performance indicators.</li> <li>• Strategic, collaborative rabbit control is promoted via participation in other agencies' planning processes.</li> <li>• Maintain data on the extent of rabbits within and beyond the DDMRB operational area, and the beneficiaries of our work.</li> </ul>
	Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual reporting and audit requirements met.</li> <li>• Emerging issues communicated to the Board and included in the risk management framework.</li> </ul>
	Workforce capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staffing structure meets operational requirements and provides for succession in the context of an aging workforce.</li> <li>• Position descriptions align with roles and responsibilities and are regularly reviewed.</li> <li>• Annual staff performance review process implemented.</li> <li>• Training needs identified and actioned.</li> </ul>
	Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operational Plan Actions 1 &amp; 2</li> </ul>
<b>Asset Management</b>	Fence maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operational Plan Actions 3, 4, 5 &amp; 6</li> </ul>
	Fence renewal	
	Resourcing	
<b>Compliance</b>	Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operational Plan Actions 1, 7 &amp; 8</li> </ul>
	Data	
	Communication	

Table 1 - Strategies 2021-2025

## Risks and Opportunities

Risk management is an integral part of our operations and strategic focus and is a key consideration in the planning and implementation of our business. Our Risk Register is the reference point for the comprehensive suite of risks and mitigation strategies. The following risks are those considered the most fundamental to our organisational continuity. A brief description of the mitigation strategies are provided, noting comprehensive actions and strategies are contained within the performance indicators of this plan. Opportunities are also noted.

Risk	Mitigation Strategies	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Queensland Government review results in abolition of the organisation or materially reduced funding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote our long history of success in suppressing the impacts of rabbits, supported by scientific research.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review results in acknowledgment of our strategic importance and surety of funding.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A lack of new biological controls places upwards pressure on rabbit populations and impacts in our operational area.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborate with other organisations in advocating for continued funding for biological control research programs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop partnerships with agencies and community groups to deliver more effective bio-control results.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The fence ceases to be an effective barrier to rabbits.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Robust infrastructure asset management plan is resourced and implemented.</li> <li>Maintenance audits conducted regularly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fence condition is improved over time, providing and even more effective barrier.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A lack of effective compliance tools results in increasing rabbit populations and impacts in our operational area.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaboratively develop and implement an effective compliance strategy with partner local governments.</li> <li>Advocate for regulatory change where necessary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compliance tools are enhanced, leading to improved outcomes and efficiency.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A lack of adequate resources leads to ineffective asset management or compliance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Processes are in place to ensure strong leadership, governance and accountability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asset management and compliance strategies are properly resourced.</li> </ul>

Table 2 - Risks & Opportunities

Appendix 1  
**Operational Plan**



**2024-2025**

Action	Responsibility	KPI	Strategic Plan Link
<b>1. Improve Local Government (&amp; other stakeholder) engagement</b>	CEO	<b>1.1</b> Quarterly Communiques provided to partner LGs <b>1.2</b> Draft budget, strategic plan provided for partner LG comment <b>1.3</b> Implement QFPI7 project and collect data on the extent of rabbits in areas adjoining the DDMRB operational area <b>1.4</b> Implement Communications Strategy	<b>Governance</b>
		<b>2.1</b> Funding sources investigated to achieve operational and strategic objectives	
<b>2. Identify external funding opportunities</b>	CEO		
<b>3. Maintain fence in rabbit proof condition</b>	Inspector	<b>3.1</b> Audit shows fence is maintained at >98% rabbit proof condition	<b>Asset Management</b>
<b>4. Fence renewal and maintenance</b>	Inspector	<b>4.1</b> Fence condition data maintained in Fulcrum database <b>4.2</b> 100% of fence = or > FAIR condition <b>4.3</b> 'Gates & Grids' project implemented as per milestones	
<b>5. Asset management</b>	CEO & Inspector	<b>5.1</b> Infrastructure and plant replacement program implemented <b>5.2</b> Biannual grid audit completed	
<b>6. Implement housing strategy</b>	CEO	<b>6.1</b> Investigate commercial options for surplus reserve lands held in trust <b>6.2</b> Install solar power systems and rainwater storage in line with Environmental Sustainability Policy	
<b>7. Improve control of rabbits</b>	CEO, Inspector & Compliance Coordinators	<b>7.1</b> Compliance strategy, incl. fee for service implemented, in collaboration with partner LGs <b>7.2</b> Provide control advice for 10 properties per month	<b>Compliance</b>
		<b>7.3</b> 5 breeding sites cleared of rabbits per month <b>7.4</b> Pet rabbit reports dealt with within 5 working days	
	Compliance Coordinators		

		7.5 QFPI7 project implemented as per milestones	
<b>8. Maintain rabbit distribution and abundance data</b>	Compliance Coordinator	<b>8.1</b> 100 property inspections per month <b>8.2</b> Compliance data maintained in Fulcrum database	