



## **Frankie Seymour's submission on the NSW government's horse murdering policy and program in Kosciuszko National Park**

The NSW government's current policy of killing brumbies in Kosciuszko National Park, on the spurious grounds of protecting native species, is:

- inevitably cruel;
- ethically abhorrent;
- inherently ineffective;
- environmentally counterproductive; and
- knowingly deceitful and hypocritical.

At best, it is treating a symptom while the disease rages on unchecked.

At worst, it is a scapegoating exercise, blaming innocent victims for the reign of destruction white settlement has inflicted, and continues to inflict on Australian native biodiversity.

### **Inevitably cruel**

1. The landscape of the National Park is mountainous, much of it inaccessible by land vehicle. Therefore, the only way of killing the horses is to shoot them from the air.
  - Shooting a moving target from a moving platform guarantees a horrifically low rate of clean kills.
  - Furthermore, the inaccessibility of the terrain makes it virtually impossible for shooters to reach wounded animals in order to euthanase them.
2. Killing mares inevitably orphans dependent foals to suffer terror and grief and to die slowly from starvation.
3. Nor is it only the horses who suffer the cruelty of the NSW brumby killing.
  - The noise of the shooting and the panic of the horses disturbs and terrifies native animals.
  - The stench of the horse bodies, left to rot on the ground, disrupts olfactory signals native animals rely on for their daily needs and protection.
  - Native animals are vulnerable to diseases breeding in the corpses.
  - Native animals are vulnerable to predation by abnormal insurgences of carnivores attracted by the corpses.
  - "Friendly fire" from the a moving platform in the air will inevitably sometimes wound or kill native animals instead of horses.



If reducing any population, human or animal, is genuinely necessary, there is only one humane way to do it that is not inherently cruel: fertility control.

As explained hereunder, horses exercise their own fertility control in equilibrium with available recourses. Artificially induced fertility control could be used to reduce the population more quickly, or to reduce it now that the current debacle had destroyed the mechanism of natural fertility control.

### **Ethically abhorrent**

In addition to being cruel, killing these horses is ethically unacceptable. Robbing any healthy sentient being of its life against its will is inherently immoral, but this killing is particularly abhorrent.

These horses are the descendants of horses brought to Australia by no will of their own, but by the will of the white settlers. They were allowed to escape and form naturalised populations. For good or ill, their ancestors served the settlers, suffered for them, and helped them build a nation here. To murder their descendants (especially for such spurious reasons – see below) is an inexcusable betrayal.

### **Inherently ineffective**

If the objective of the NSW brumby killing program is conserving native biodiversity, it is incapable of achieving its objective.

Once again, because of the inaccessibility of the terrain, it is impossible to shoot every single brumby in the Park. Since the landscape remains ideal habitat for the horses, failing to kill every single horse ensures that every single horse shot will be replaced by the progeny of the survivors within relatively few years.

When a population is dramatically reduced as by mass killing, vastly increased resources of the habitat are available to be shared among the survivors and their progeny, guaranteeing very rapid population replenishment.

In natural horse populations, dominant stallions enforce fertility control in a herd, preventing overpopulation. When the dominant stallions, along with their natural successors, are indiscriminately murdered, as per the NSW government policy/management plan, the natural fertility control no longer operates, unless the killing ceases long enough for new dominant stallions to emerge.

In the meantime, while there will be a brief reduction in population immediately following a mass slaughter, the inevitable result in the longer term is not fewer horses, but an artificially sustained higher population of horses than you started with.



If reducing any population, human or animal, is genuinely necessary, there is only one effective way to do it: fertility control. Only through fertility control can you ultimately reach every individual in a population. Killing might reduce the initial population much faster, of course, but only for a short while. If you cannot totally exterminate a population in one fell swoop, fertility control is the only way to eradicate it.

### **Environmentally counterproductive**

Killing pogroms against fast-breeding "feral" (ie naturalised) non-native animals (eg rabbits, pigs, rats, mice, cats, foxes, dogs, pigeons, sparrows, Indian mynas etc) generally guarantee - within months, sometimes weeks, rarely more than a year - a larger population than you had before you started killing them.

Compared to these animals, horses are relatively slow breeders (usually only one foal a year, and only as the dominant stallion allows). So killing horses is not quite as wildly counterproductive as killing other "feral" animals.

However, because there are few predators (either native or naturalised) in Australia who are large enough to bring down a horse, or even a foal who has adults to protect it, the replenishment of population after a massacre is just as certain, if a bit less rapid, as with the faster-breeding animals.

So, the NSW killing program still guarantees a larger population of brumbies, not a smaller one, until such time as the killing ceases. The political advantage of killing them is, of course, that "eradicating" this larger replacement population will be some other government's problem.

As mentioned above (under cruelty), if the purpose of killing horses is to conserve native species, it is counter-productive because of the impact the killing has on native animals: noise pollution, olfactory pollution, disease from rotting corpses, carnivores drawn by rotting corpses, and "friendly fire".

### **Knowingly deceitful and hypocritical**

It is impossible that those who have developed the NSW brumby killing policy, plans and programs do not understand that killing the horses must inevitably increase the population rather than reduce it. If they have any understanding of biology and ecology, they *must* know this.

So why *are* they killing them?



The self-professed experts advising the NSW government will answer that the horses are systematically changing the landscape of the National Park. To which we answer: so why knowingly make matters worse by killing them?

Or they will answer, that the horses are damaging the headwaters of Australia's most significant river system by trampling the vegetation (such as sphagnum moss) which is critical to storing the water that feed the streams that feed to river system. Again, we answer: so why knowingly make matters worse by killing them?

### **Murdering a symptom while the disease rages on**

The Kosciuszko brumbies were naturalised in what later became the National Park nearly two hundred years ago. For much of that time, thanks to the natural fertility control exercised by the dominant stallions, their population has been stable. Recently, the government alleges, their population has increased.

There is a single compelling and terrifying reason why their population would have increased "recently", and it is one that will not be solved by killing horses, nor any other animal.

The horse population has increased because anthropogenic climate change has raised the snowline and this has increased the range of the horses, and given them more breeding room.

Certainly, the landscape has been changed. The change began with sheep and cattle grazing in the Snowy region, and has been further hacked about by roads and ski fields and ski resorts, and the ongoing extermination of keystone species such as kangaroos on the surrounding farmland. While it would be futile to deny that the wild horses may have contributed to the landscape change, the key word is "changed", past tense.

Like so much of pre-settlement Australia that has been utterly destroyed, gone is gone. You cannot put the omelette back in the egg. Even if eradicating the horses were possible, it would now be pointless. A new landscape, complete with new self-sustaining ecosystems, will (hopefully) eventually stabilise in this altered landscape, but we will never get the old landscape back, no matter what we do; Australians have long since blown our chances of doing that.

Of much more immediate concern are the precious headwaters of our river systems. Aside, from killing horses, which we know will only make things worse in the long run by increasing horse numbers, what can be done to keep the horses off this critical vegetation?

There are some options: vegetation (such as candle heath), sonic, olfactory and visual repellents and fencing to keep the horses away from the remnant sphagnum bogs and the river headwaters.



However, the next question has to be whether keeping the horses off the vegetative water storage system will help in the critical vegetation in the long run. As the snow continues to recede, will the sphagnum moss and other water hugging plants be able to survive, no matter how protected they are from trampling?

It is extremely unlikely that keeping the horses from trampling the headwaters will be anything but a temporary solution to the forthcoming crash of Australia's major river system.

### **A scapegoating exercise**

Any ecologist with two brain cells to rub together knows that, unless you can achieve swift and total eradication, killing either fast-breeding animals or animals without predators, is inherently counterproductive; you end up with more of them, not less. If you sustain the killing year after year, you sustain the higher population in perpetuity. If you stop the killing, you end up with pretty much exactly the same population you started with (subject to other changes in the environment).

The only explanation for the government's policy of killing brumbies in Kosciusko National Park, or of killing any other innocent and defenceless animal, is to distract attention away from some real problem the government refuses to address: in this case, the impact of anthropogenic climate change on the headwaters of the Murray River System.