



Managing Feral Pigs:

Biodiversity and Production working together in the Lower Paroo Catchment, QLD



A Shared Threat in the Landscape

The Lower Paroo River catchment in south-west Queensland is a vast and dynamic landscape of wetlands, floodplains and range country.

This region supports both agricultural production and significant biodiversity, including important breeding habitats for waterbirds in areas such as the internationally significant Currawinya Lakes Ramsar Site and its contributory wetlands on surrounding properties.

Feral pigs are a persistent and widespread threat across the catchment. Highly adaptable, they respond quickly to seasonal conditions—declining during drought and rapidly increasing in favourable conditions after rain or floods. In 2019 as the extended drought conditions eased, long time locals indicated the pig numbers to be at their lowest for about 60 years, however as the rains returned pig numbers began to rise again.

The good seasons have continued for 3-4 successive years and feral pigs quickly took advantage of the conditions and bred to very high numbers. Sows were having litters of 14-16 piglets and turning them off early to breed more frequently. The good seasons provided a high survivability of piglets and predators such as dingoes, cats, foxes and eagles struggled to control the pig population.

Their sudden increase in presence places both livelihoods and ecosystems at risk, creating alarm among the community and requiring coordinated and ongoing management to make a difference. Feral pig impacts to agriculture and biodiversity are well documented and costs are in the millions of



Gary Cranitch - Queensland Museum

dollars each year in extensive damage to infrastructure and pastures, predation of livestock and wildlife, contamination of waters and spreading disease. Ground nesting waterbirds including pelicans are vulnerable to attack and the environmental damage can take years to recover. Southern Queensland Landscapes is working with landholders, agencies and local communities to increase the understanding of the feral pig menace and how to better control feral pigs.



75%

The proportion of resident pigs that must be removed to have long-term impact.

Understanding the Challenge

Effective management begins with understanding pig behaviour and movement. Monitoring is essential to developing an integrated approach:

- Land manager reports as they observe feral pigs in the landscape each day are a valuable source of information
- Remote cameras can record feral pig abundance, details of age, size, diet and behaviour. Using cameras in a systematic line or array can show where and when pigs are moving in the landscape
- Drones can give an aerial perspective of impacts and behaviour and thermal drones can be useful in detecting feral pigs activity at night or inaccessible areas
- Environmental DNA, Acoustic recorders and other new technologies are being incorporated into the tool box as they become available
- Examining and understanding the seasonal influences on pig behaviour can help determine the best time to target pigs for example, when they are congregated around dwindling resources in summer or congregating on exposed ground in major floods. The influences of temperature and rain, the availability of certain food resources during the year, and the timing of lambing and kidding or waterbird breeding events can influence pig movements and make them a more effective target for control.

Working together to make a difference

Using all the information and understanding of feral pigs built up over many years, co-ordinated programs are developed to impact pigs across as many landscapes and tenures as possible. In order to reduce populations at least 75% of the resident pigs in an area need to be removed to have an impact as feral pigs can quickly replace their numbers. Targeted ground and aerial baiting and shooting, exclusion fencing, trapping and other methods were used in a pattern of control to achieve the best outcomes.





Nature gives a helping hand

While large feral pigs have few predators, piglets are susceptible to dingoes, cats, birds of prey and even other pigs. This is especially so as conditions turn drier and food resources start to decline.

Droughts help to alleviate numbers as pigs quickly succumb to lack of food and water. Floods provide ideal conditions for control as pigs become isolated on high ground making aerial shooting highly effective.



The current program has targeted around

500,000HA

of land within the project area.



This has resulted in around

10,000 FERAL PIGS

removed through aerial shooting, ground and aerial baiting campaigns and ongoing trapping and ground shooting.



Not all properties can use each method for control but if everyone participates in the programs there are benefits for everyone involved.



As conditions turn drier and food resources decline, piglets become increasingly vulnerable to predators.



Are we winning?

While feral pigs are unlikely to ever be eradicated from the landscape, persistent, coordinated efforts can deliver real and lasting benefits. As we learn more about the behaviour and patterns of pigs we can better manage threats to livestock, waterbird breeding events and restoring the landscape damage caused by pigs. Fencing of strategic areas can help protect small livestock and natural assets. Continuing to better understand the challenges can lead to innovations to monitor and control pigs.

Monitoring after control has demonstrated successful breeding in Pelicans and other ground nesting birds. We have also seen reduced numbers on cameras and less damage to landscapes and infrastructure. Stock calving, lambing and kidding rates rise following effective pig control.

Hope for the Future

We are very grateful to all the land managers, local and state governments, contractors and others for their participation and commitment to making a difference in managing feral pigs.

The program has been successful so far in bringing the community together to address a common issue. Using all the tools in the box to manage numbers during these exceptional good conditions has helped to manage feral pigs. Everyone benefits from a landscape-scale approach to feral pigs. Keeping the pressure on as conditions inevitably turn dry again will help protect ecological assets including the Currawinya Lakes Ramsar site and the contributory wetlands and waterways in the surrounding landscape. Agricultural sustainability and biodiversity depend on healthy and functioning environmental services and by working together the whole community can achieve success.



While complete eradication from the landscape is unlikely, persistent, coordinated efforts can deliver real and lasting benefits.



P 07 4620 0111 E admin@sqlandscapes.org.au
Toowoomba | Roma | Charleville | Goondiwindi

sqlandscapes.org.au



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