
Submission by

Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage Inc
House Rabbit Society (Australian Chapter)

The Impact of Backyard Breeding of Pet Rabbit in Victoria

The Impact on Environment, the Pet Rabbit & Animal Rescues
A CASE FOR CHANGE



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Terms

BACKYARD BREEDER: refer to those who do not have a permit, are not registered as an Animal Business or are not a member of a breeder's association.

REGISTERED BREEDER: refers to a breeder that is registered with a relevant authority such as government authority or breeders' association.

PEST ANIMAL: Any rabbit let loose in the environment, wild or domestic.

Summary

Rabbits are the third most popular pet in Victoria; however, they are not covered under Animal Law in Victoria! Backyard Breeders are causing overpopulation and ill health in rabbits through interbreeding and overbreeding. This sets in motion a cycle of naive breeding and abandonment within their first year of life.

With no intervention over the last 15 years, this has become a pressing animal welfare issue; a mental health issue for animal workers and those concerned for the welfare of the pet rabbit, as well as an occupational health and safety issue for vets and animal care workers; and an environment issue as abandoned pet rabbits are dumped in parks and wildlife reserves across the state.

There is an urgent need to address the sale, backyard breeding and abandonment of the pet rabbit in order:

- to make sellers and owners accountable for their pet rabbits
- to give authorities the power to act on cases of abuse, neglect, and abandonment.
- to prevent contributing to the feral rabbit population

Rabbit shelters cannot accommodate the number of abandoned pet rabbits resulting in

- high euthanasia rates or
- If turned away the rabbits are released into the environment to add to the feral rabbit population or left to die in cages and boxes with no food or water.

If this issue continues to be ignored, governments may face emerging OHS or environmental cases for their inaction.

Preferred Outcomes

- Pet rabbits covered under the Domestic Animal Act
- Strict control over the selling, backyard breeding, purchase, and abandonment of the pet rabbit
- Include the pet rabbit under laws regarding Breeding, Sale and Pet Shop legislation and codes.
- Enforcement of laws (to be reviewed) regarding the breeding, sale, release and dumping of pet rabbits.
- Enforcement of laws at point of sale regarding accurate information on the species, (desexing, housing diet, health) to address animal welfare issues of neglect, breeding, and abandonment.
- Lift the age of the sale of the pet rabbit from 5 weeks to 8 or 10 weeks to ensure the sex of the animal is determined correctly.
- Consideration to re classify the pet rabbit as a ‘restricted pet’ (like reptiles and exotic birds) so that correct information is given to the new owner.
- Review all laws, regulations, and codes, to make it illegal to breed or sell pet rabbits from the home property without a permit or registration from council or other authority.
- Register all pet breeding entities with their local council.
- Consider a prepaid desexing and vaccination voucher to be sold with the animal.

If a pet rabbit is sold desexed or sold with a prepaid voucher, it adds value to the sale and purchasers are more likely to consider the purchase and less likely to impulse buy. If the cost of a rabbit rises to around \$350, it becomes a more valued asset that the owner will more likely protect by investing in the correct husbandry and care.



ARIEL was surrendered with.

- *3 six-week-old babies AND*
- *4 one week old babies AND*
- *she was pregnant again with 5 more babies.*
- *12 babies to rehome from one owner.*
- *Ariel had three consecutive litters in 3 months, and she nearly died.*



1. ANIMAL LAW IN AUSTRALIA

Laws pertaining to Rabbits at a Federal, State and Local Council level mostly pertain to Intensive Farming, Research Laboratories and Pest Control, with a focus on productivity and economics.

In Victoria the “Catchment and Land Protection Act” (CALPA) sets out laws regarding pest animals. Pet rabbits let loose in the environment become a ‘pest animal’ under the CALPA definition. This Act has penalties for releasing a pest animal, however, the law is not enforced. The Act classifies rabbits as introduced declared pests, it does not differentiate between domestic pet rabbits and wild rabbits or where they are located.

The Domestic Animals Act 1994, Domestic Animals Regulations 2005, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 and Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulations (POCTA) 1997 are administered at a state level and are more focused on the domestic pet, farm, and animal businesses. Many of these regulations rely on Codes of Practice to define cruelty in the areas of breeding, boarding, and shelters, however they do not mention rabbits. Regarding pet shops, any mention of rabbits is often associated with marketing and sales and does not address the welfare or information required by the new owner to understand the care of the species.

Victoria: Councils & Local Law

Rabbits are not included in the Domestic Animal Act (1994) therefore councils do not include them in their Domestic Animal Management Plans.

Councils cannot provide aid or guidance regarding rabbit welfare issues or abandoned pet rabbits, while some councils still classify rabbits as rodents and not lagomorphs.

The limit on the number of adult rabbits that a household can have without a permit varies between councils from 2 to 10 animals, while some councils allow up to 30 rabbits under the age of 3 months.

This practice leads to backyard breeders letting their animals interbreed and selling rabbits and other animals including dogs or cats without any constraint and with health issues.

One country-based council states that the maximum number of domestic rabbits in residential zoning is zero but unlimited in farm zones indicating a willingness for farm activities and ignoring that rabbits can be kept as pets.

When reporting pet rabbits running loose in the street, an individual is referred to a private rescue, who are then charged with doing the council's job of capturing or removing the animals and dealing with the uncontrolled breeding situation that has developed. Usually having to accommodate between 20 and 40 animals at the one time, with many pregnant females. No private or mainstream rescue organization has the permits or the capacity to accommodate this number of animals.

Whilst animal shelters listed under the Domestic Animal Act are exempt from microchip transfer fees when rehoming an animal, our council declined a request for the fee exemptions to apply to a rabbit shelter because rabbits were not included in the Domestic Animal Act.

Laws regarding the breeding and sale of pet rabbits are non-existent. This means that pet shops can sell pet rabbits encouraging impulse buying and without accountability for the animal's wellbeing.

Individuals can breed and sell pet rabbits in their home leading to overpopulation, abuse, and neglect. The Breeders Associations rely on a code of practice from the United Kingdom; however, this code is not enforced, and some rogue breeders are neglectful of their animals. The codes also have exemptions from laws regarding the sale of pet rabbits, for those breeding from their home. As all backyard breeding is done from home premises, this section of the code needs to be reviewed. See Appendix B: Rabbit Breeders Association.

Current World Trends in Animal Law

In the last decade progress has been made which has resulted in worldwide campaigns:

1. **United Kingdom's** ban on using animals for testing products.
2. In **Switzerland** and other **European countries**, the classification of vertebrates as non-objects, have passed into law. This recognizes that animals are sentient beings and have intrinsic value. It also confers protection by the state rather than private bodies.
3. In **America** there is movement towards banning the selling of pets in pet shops unless they are sourced from animal shelters due to the overburdening numbers of animals within animal welfare agencies.

4. The **Swiss** were the first to recognize that animals are sentient beings, and this has been followed by countries such as the **UK, Germany,** and other **European nations**.
5. Sentience recognizes that animals are feeling, thinking creatures that have an ordered existence within their own species.
6. The Animal Welfare Bill passed in **New Zealand** recognizes sentience. This bill allows law enforcement officials to prosecute people in animal cruelty cases and ban animal research and testing. Making hunting and capture of wild animals illegal.

“Expectations on animal welfare have been rapidly changing, and practices that were once commonplace for pets and farm stock are no longer acceptable or tolerated,” said Dr. Steve

Merchant, President of the New Zealand Veterinary Association. *“The bill brings legislation in line with our nation’s changing attitude on the status of animals in society.”*

Effects of Legal Change

- New Zealand has recognized the sentience of animals and has joined with other countries such as the UK, Germany, and other European nations to declassify animals as property, which starts the process that animals have rights to protection in law.
- Countries that recognize the sentience of animals also influence change to the definition of animal ownership, with humans viewed as their guardians and not their owners.
- Recognition of the sentience of animals is a starting point for governments to recognize that animals have rights to protection in law and are responsible for paying for the cost of prosecutions. In Switzerland this has resulted in trebling the rate of prosecutions.

The speed of change in animal welfare is accelerated due to social media platforms. Reactions to all aspects of animal welfare are disclosed quickly from all over the world. Issues that are seen to be detrimental to animals or offensive to humans can be exposed to millions within a short time frame.



2. ECONOMIC IMPACT

Rabbits

Rabbits were introduced to Australia during European. The rabbit occupies all states and territories and offshore islands. They are responsible for over \$206 million damage annually and a threat to agriculture and biodiversity.

Wild dogs (including dingoes and hybrids)

Introduced to Australia several thousand years ago. Currently responsible for significant livestock losses. May suppress other pest species, such as rabbits. Widespread across all states and territories, and a small area in Tasmania. A threat to agriculture and biodiversity. Production losses are estimated at \$48 million annually.

Foxes

Introduced to Australia from Europe in 1871. Occupy all states and territories. A major predator of native wildlife and responsible for significant losses to sheep grazers costs \$227 million annually. A threat to agriculture and biodiversity (Pestsmart 2015)

Comparative Damage

- From the above data foxes and dogs give a total cost equaling \$275 million (mainly to sheep graziers), this does not include a figure for ecological damage which can lead to extinction of wildlife or damage in metropolitan areas. Rabbits cause damage of \$206 million. Feral rabbits are the second highest cause of economic loss after canines. We would argue that pet rabbits also contribute to the growth of feral populations if not controlled.
- Further any animal that can become a feral pest and create an economic burden on the country needs to be desexed and microchipped to establish prior ownership to enable prosecution of those who dump rabbits.



The Catchment and Land Protection Act (CALPA)

The CALPA is mostly associated with rural land management to control declared pests or invasive weeds. In Australia the majority of public, who do not have pet rabbits, regard all rabbits as feral pests. The CALPA states that individuals are obliged by law to control flora and fauna on their property, and this includes their pet rabbits.

The CALPA in Relation to the Pet Rabbits

The CALPA classifies rabbits as introduced declared pests, it does not differentiate between domestic pet rabbits and wild rabbits.

Penalties are high for breaches of the Act. An offence is committed if.

- an individual allows a rabbit to wander about in an uncontained manner.
- or places it in another's property (private or public)
- Releases it into the wild
- Allows it to be ownerless.

Whilst the above breaches are common, we are not aware of any prosecution under this Act. Whilst there is a marked increase in rabbits as house pets, there is also an increase in impulse buying, breeding, and dumping of pet rabbits, which accelerates during peak holiday periods.



As buns mature the males will display dominance behaviors' if not desexed. They can sustain life threatening injuries and if not treated can end in death. Desexing is at 3 and 5 months for the males and 4 to 6 months for the females, depending on the breed.

3. SOCIAL IMPACT

Mental Health: The Fatal Epidemic of Animal Care Workers

Veterinarians, shelters, and others working with animals have pleaded with Governments to introduce laws to reduce overpopulation leading to the killing of animals due to the lack of space at animal rescues. According to researchers at Purdue and Bowling Green Universities, three out of four animal shelter workers exhibit signs of euthanasia-related stress. Those charged with performing animal euthanasia are at risk from a variety of psychological, emotional, and physical ailments such as high blood pressure, ulcers, unresolved grief, depression, substance abuse, and suicide.

“The first [mental health survey](#) for veterinarians revealed that one in six have contemplated suicide. A [recent study](#) by the [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#) reveals that animal rescue workers have a suicide rate of 5.3 in 1 million workers. This is the highest suicide rate among American workers; a rate shared only by [firefighters and police officers](#). The national suicide average for American workers is 1.5 per 1 million”. *Source: Humane Society United States.*

Situations the worker is confronted with daily such as dealing with irresponsible owners, distressing situations involving animals, turning animals away and not knowing their future all play on the mental state of the worker.

There are two types of stress conditions identified in animal workers.

1. The “**Killing Caring Paradox**” where those that work in the industry do so because they care about animals and yet are killing them due to overpopulation.
2. The second is “**Compassion Fatigue**”, also known as “Secondary-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (STSD). The symptoms of STSD are like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As with PTSD, Compassion Fatigue can lead to depression and thoughts of suicide.

Symptoms may manifest as:

Increased use of alcohol and drugs, absenteeism (missing work), anger and irritability, emotional exhaustion, distancing, negative self-image, depression, reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy, resentment, cynicism, dread of working with certain clients,

helplessness, diminished sense of enjoyment/career, depersonalization, disruption of world view/heightened anxiety or irrational fears, problems with intimacy, intrusive imagery, hypersensitivity to emotionally charged stimuli, insensitivity to emotional material, loss of hope, difficulty separating personal and professional lives, failure to nurture and develop non-work-related aspects of life. **Sources:** Saakvitne (1995), Figley (1995), Gentry, Baranowsky & Dunning (1997).

Psychotherapist J. Eric Gentry stated that:

“Animal care professionals are some of the most pain-saturated people I have ever worked with. The very thing that makes them great at their work, their empathy and dedication and love for animals, makes them vulnerable.”

Molly Sumner is the owner and founder of Kindred Companions and a professional anthrozoologist and certified professional dog trainer & behavioral consultant with 20 years of experience working with a variety of pets and their humans. Molly observed that...

“Those with a deep compassion for animals take a considerable amount of weight on their shoulders. Because animals cannot speak for themselves, rescuers feel they must break their own personal limits to give a voice to those in need.”

Economic Costs of Mental Health in Animal Workers

The economic cost of mental health issues to animal workers is immense resulting in the inability to work, relationship and marital breakdowns, or suicide.

In other industries such as Defense, Police, and Paramedics this is emerging as a serious Occupational Health Safety issue but is ignored when it concerns workers in the Animal Welfare Industry. This human factor of OHS can be addressed by government passing through adequate laws to reduce the overpopulation of animals and breaking the present cycle of breeder to pet shop, to impulse buyer to animal surrender/dumping and then death.

Stressors can be reduced with a tougher legal stance on desexing, breeding, impulse buying, and education. In the USA, kill rates in shelters were reduced by 70% after a tougher legal stance was introduced in past decades.

4. RABBIT DEMOGRAPHICS

The Pet Rabbit Owner

Rabbits are the 3rd most popular pet after cats and dogs. Pet rabbit owners fall into two distinct categories.

- **The Naive Owner:** those that purchase an animal with no knowledge of the species, breeding cycle, vet care or the care requirements. This owner considers the animal to be a cheap, child's pet. The owner will not spend any money on the animal to desex and vaccinate or treat the animal for illness. The animal is discarded when the child has lost interest.
- **The informed Owner:** the owner is informed and regards the animal for its intrinsic value and intelligence, it is part of the family and is protected and loved, is desexed and vaccinated and lives inside the home (with supervised time outdoors) as a free-range house rabbit.

The House Rabbit

Rabbits are the preferred pet for those that live in apartments where space is not suited to accommodating a cat or dog. There is a growing trend for pet rabbits to be kept inside as free-range animals with space outside for exercise. This is the main driving force for the phenomenal growth of numbers of rabbits kept as house rabbits and their selection as a pet of choice for singles and young couples. The size of this group is indicated by the Town Planning for Melbourne which includes an increase in high rise accommodation.

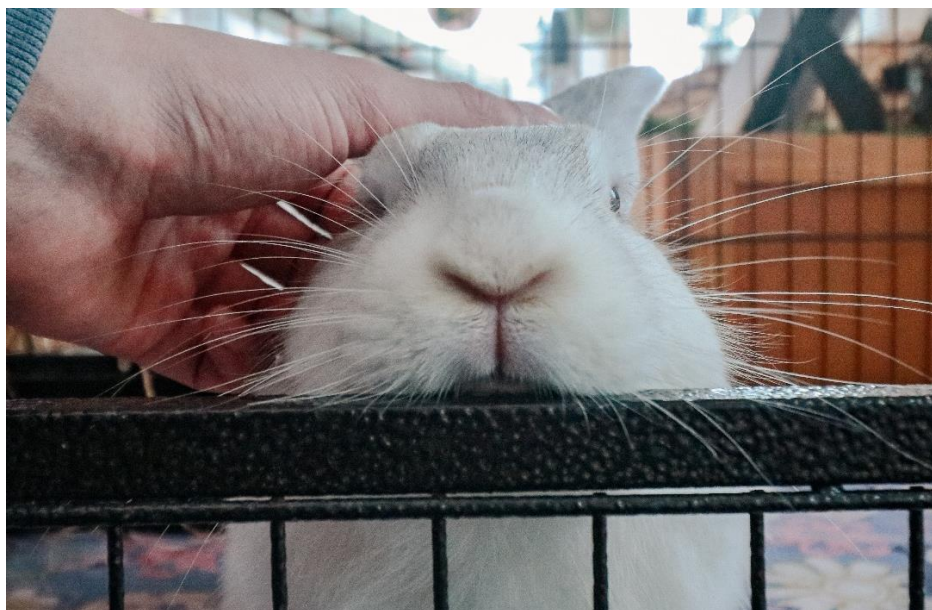
The shift to smaller sized dwellings is one of the factors in rabbits becoming an alternative of pet as a companion and sometimes as a substitute child; other influences for this choice are the lack of space in small dwellings, Traditional pets are being rejected for reasons such as time to walk a dog, or the inability to allow a cat outside.

In places such as Singapore and Hong Kong where high rise living in smaller apartments is normal, rabbits outnumber dogs and cats kept as pets.

The Emergence of the Rabbit Savvy Vet

Over the 20 years of involvement with rabbits there has been remarkable growth in the increasing numbers of vets who are specializing in rabbits, this involves training in exotics which is not covered extensively in general vet studies.

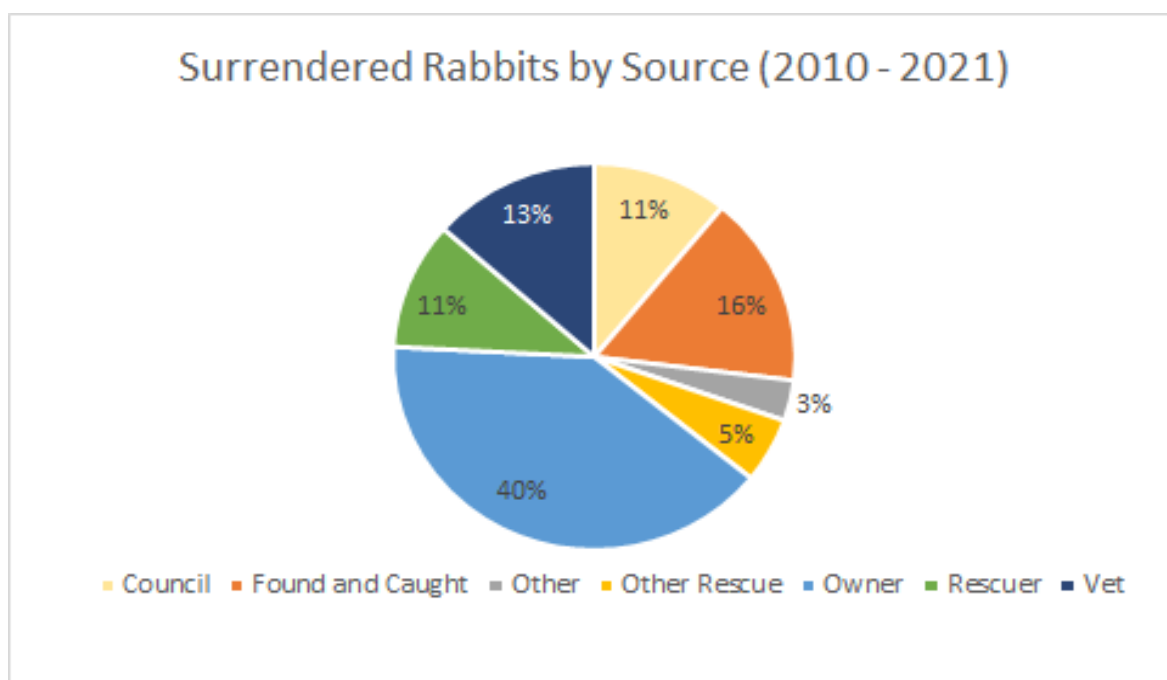
- The Australian Veterinary Association held a conference in May 2015 with 8 different streams of lectures in the afternoon session, one of these was for rabbits. The lecture was filled, and the doors closed for safety reasons after the aisles were filled with over 150 vets sitting on the floor and standing around walls. The location was in Queensland where it is illegal to keep rabbits.



5. DATA & EVIDENCE

DATA on Surrenders

Rabbit Runaway Orphanage has collected data and evidence on pet rabbits presenting at the rescue since 2010. The evidence clearly shows that most are surrendered by their owners and most of the animals are under 12 months of age when surrendered. Many are from unexpected litters, and all are unwanted. The conclusion is that the owner was not informed at point of sale, about the nature of the pet rabbit, the breeding cycle and vet care needed, the nature of the animal and food, housing, and care requirements. What the owner ended up with was not the animal they expected.



LEGEND

5% OTHER RESCUE: Transferred from mainstream rescues because of treatable health conditions or behavioral issues. These rescues often do not have programs to cater for these animals.

11% RESCUER: Intervention by individuals to remove animals from bad circumstances such as advertised on Gumtree for food or from people that cannot care for them adequately.

16% FOUND AND CAUGHT: Stray and dumped animals caught by the public.

13% VET: Handed in or surrendered to vet clinics.

11% COUNCIL Most council pounds move rabbits into private rescues as they are not covered under animal law, and they are not obliged to rehome them.

40% OWNER: Most are unwanted by owners, or they can no longer care for them. Most are not desexed and many are pregnant or have had litters which are surrendered with the adult rabbits. Many animals are surrendered prior to the holidays.

3% OTHER: Surrendered for legitimate reasons such as a death of owner, mental health, or homelessness.

IMPORTANT: 97% of animals at rescues are unwanted. If we consider those surrendered by owners, found, and caught, handed in to vets, other rescues or councils or caught by rescuers; this paints a dim picture of abandoned rabbits and the need for intervention at point of sale (breeding, pet shops etc.).

EVIDENCE of Backyard Breeding

The backyard breeder is mostly ill-informed regarding the pet rabbit. The animals are put in a small space in the backyard and ignored until they die from a rabbit related virus, illness, or predator attack, or they escape the backyard into neighboring properties. As they are not desexed, they breed and within a few months the situation is out of control and the owner or neighbor calls a rescue to take the animals. If the rescue is at its capacity the animals are either dumped or left to continue breeding.

Case 1

In mid-December 2022, our rescue received a call from a couple who were returning overseas the following week and wanted to rehome their rabbits. They had 38 rabbits!



- They purchased 2 rabbits from Gumtree, they did not know the sex, the breeding cycle, or how to care for them. They had not desexed or vaccinated any of them.
- If rescue did not take them, they were going to let them go!
- There were 4 adults, and the 2 females were pregnant. The 34 baby rabbits were all under 8 weeks old and ranged from 1 week to 8 weeks.
- Within 2 days of arriving at the Orphanage, the 1st adult died, it was the calici virus.
- The Orphanage spent thousands on vaccinating all the animals except for the 1-week-old babies.
- Then over the next 4 weeks, we nursed cared for them and watched the mother buns and the babies die from the calici virus, and it was heartbreaking. Only five of the one-week-old babies survived and were hand reared.

This is a common scenario that we have witnessed each year over many years.

Case 2

In April 2023 we had a call from an associated rescue, who had 22 rabbits dumped in the night boxes at their shelter.

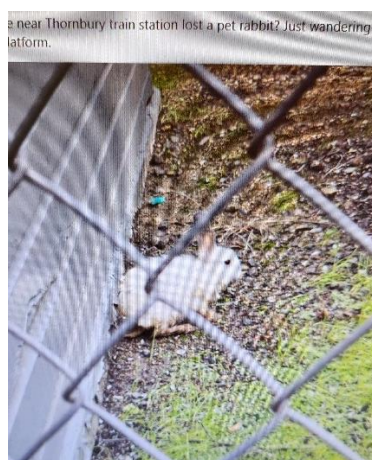
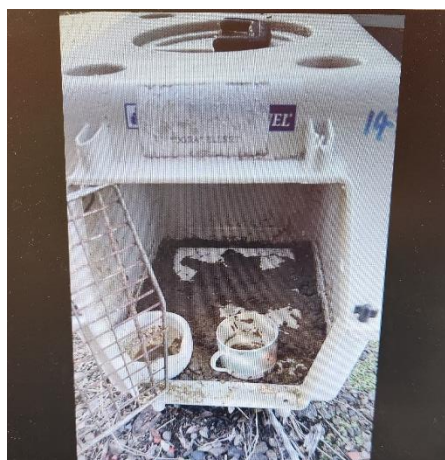
- Most of the animals were sick and a couple had to be euthanised.
- A couple of the rabbits with treatable health issues were transferred to our rescue, one was 8years old and the other was 6weeks old.
- The person that dumped the animals has done this before and will start breeding again and continue to dump the animals.
- This situation has been replicated for years going back to 2006 when we took in our first foster rabbit from this associate rescue. The rabbit that we took in originally was from a dumping of 40 animals, that were interbred, and all had health conditions.



Case 3

In May 2023, we had a call from a vet clinic who had two cashmere young rabbits handed in to them. The animals were in a neglected state and in very poor health.

These animals had been dumped in a carrier at a train station with no food or water and the carrier was in a filthy condition. Strangers spent hours trying to catch them.



Over past years, we have had rabbits abandoned in cages in backstreets, in shopping bags in laneways at shopping centers, left in abandoned buildings when people move, or in a cage on the lawn of abandoned properties, left at train stations, abandoned in the botanical gardens in Melbourne as well as left in cages outside our rescue.

Abandoned Pet Rabbits Breeding in the Wild

Although domestic rabbits are unlikely to survive in the wild, they can establish colonies in areas where Government baiting and biocontrol is unlikely, such as in suburban areas and in areas where predators such as dogs are leashed in parks and golf courses. Uncontrolled breeding can occur in backyard suburbs, where after eating the available grass in the property, the rabbits seek food outside the property with little or no accountability for the owners. When concerned neighbors seek help about this invasion into their property, they find little or no support from Government, Councils, or law enforcement agencies.

Rabbit Run-away Orphanage has been involved with 3 major rescues this year capturing 20 to 30 rabbits from each property and surrounds each time. Methods used to trap or manually catch pet rabbits are very time consuming and expensive. One major rescue took volunteers 5 months to capture all the rabbits.

Australian governing bodies concern themselves with pest control and the productivity of the farming industry, while the welfare of pet rabbits is ignored. Several means are employed for the purpose of wild rabbit population reduction, none of them particularly humane to rabbits or other affected non-targets. Among those are: “lethal baiting, warren destruction and fumigation, shooting, trapping, exclusion fencing and biological control with [the release of viruses] RHDV and Myxomatosis.” *Source: (Sharp & Saunders, 2005, p. 6 in Chenery, C-A (2011) Lagomorphs in the U.S., Australia, and Japan: A Comparison of Attitudes toward and Treatment of Rabbits*

Traditional methods of eradication would be difficult to achieve in the suburbs and concerns of residents would include their children viewing or touching dead pet rabbits.



BORONIA BABIES: 26 rabbits came to our rescue over 8 weeks. They arrived in groups as they were caught by residents.
The mother rabbit was abandoned or escaped and had breed under someone's front veranda.

Appendix A

PET SHOPS

- The United Kingdom has banned the sale of pets in pet shops, while in Los Angeles in the United States, a law was passed where pet shops are to source animals from shelters. It would help if the rabbit was classified as a restricted pet. This would force businesses to train and upskill their staff knowledge on the pet rabbit species.

The pet shop salesman

A mystery pet shop survey conducted by the Orphanage showed that pet shops are not skilled in the species and are not providing accurate information to new pet owners about the pet rabbit.

Staff knowledge is generally inadequate and inaccurate unless the staff member has an indoor pet rabbit. Basic dietary information is often incorrect, and owners are informed they are cheap to feed with scraps which can result in gut stasis and dental issues, or the promotion of manufactured junk food leading to obesity with resultant problems such as flystrike.

When information is given, it generally concentrates on the sale of products sold with the rabbit rather than the welfare and husbandry of the rabbit. The uninformed salesperson does not know about the care needs of a rabbit, as their job is to sell, and it is not to know the intricacies of the species. Good salesmen take pride in their ability to turn a prospect into a sale leading to an animal sold by impulse or manipulation by the salesperson. This philosophy is opposite to that of welfare organizations that put animal needs as the primary aim and encourages education and considered decision making prior to purchase. Purchasers rely on information and expertise of salespeople when making a purchase and this is no different when buying a pet.

Staff knowledge is around the products they sell in store. Many of these products are not suitable for rabbits such as promoting over the counter treatments for “small animals” for routine worming, mites, and chew blocks. These are all dangerous and not recommended by the rabbit savvy vets.

Sexing and age of the pet rabbit

There is a public perception that the age of rabbits sold in pet shops is too young. The code of practice states that rabbits can be sold at five weeks of age. In our opinion, this is too young. The mother rabbit will demonstrate behaviors to its young and will wean them between 4 and 8 weeks. Responsible rabbit breeders sell rabbits at ten weeks and do not sell to pet shops.

At five weeks of age, there is difficulty in determining the correct sex resulting in unplanned litters.

It is difficult for vets to determine the sex accurately at this young age, so how can untrained staff or their suppliers who are usually backyard breeders or prior customers with accidental litters cope with this problem.

The incorrect sexing of the animals leads to unwanted litters or territorial fighting between two males which then requires the animals to be separated. This mis sexing occurs frequently and suggests that sexing the animals is guesswork.

The unwanted litter leads to “disposal” issues and perpetuates a cycle resulting in overpopulation, surrendering to overflowing shelters or dumping the animals.

It is easier to determine sex when older, so the solution is simple, increase the minimum age at which rabbits are sold to ten weeks.

Housing arrangements used within pet shops show a lack of understanding of the species. The current size and placement of housing does not meet the rabbit’s needs as a prey animal. The size is inadequate and does not allow the placement of hiding spots, tunnels, and enrichment necessary for their health and wellbeing.

The Code of Practice for Pet Shops

This document needs to be reviewed and updated with the following points.

- Staff knowledge needs to be addressed so that customers are given accurate information.
- The information supplied must focus on husbandry and be educational regarding the nature and care of the animal, rather than a sales brochure about the products from the pet shop that they can buy (most of which are unsuitable for the rabbit).
- A prepaid voucher for desexing could be included in the sale with high fines if not carried out within 6 months unless a vet deems the procedure to be a health risk for the animal.
- A record needs to be kept and be available for scrutiny and cover the source and sale of animals.
- Animals should be sold with a guarantee of the correct sex to eliminate accidental litters.
- Rabbits are to be kept in 2 sq M enclosures in a quiet environment suitable for their nature as prey animals.
- The pet shop should offer a guarantee of return of the animal if the owners cannot care for it. This is the practice adopted by both regulated breeders and animal rescues.

Appendix B

RABBIT BREEDERS' ASSOCIATIONS

Rabbit Breeders are part of the supply/ demand chain; however, rabbit breeding relies on self-regulation and the industry in Victoria is unregulated and many of the associations are no longer affiliated.

Rabbit Breeders Association of Victoria (RBAV)

The following information was provided by Veronica Elliott, Vice President of the Rabbit Breeders Association of Victoria (RBAV) and a member of the Northern County Rabbit Club (NCRC) and The Victorian Rabbit Association Inc (TVRA).

Breeder Rehoming

The sheer number of rabbits we have all been helping rehome or take in lately has been phenomenal! way more than previous years and ten times worse since covid, during which we saw kits as young as three weeks' being sold. It was incredibly heart breaking, and the cross breeding were also incredibly sad, causing severe dental issues.

- All we could do was report those sellers, but I do not feel anything was done.
- During this time, the market was flooded unbelievably not just bunnies but many other pets as well.
- We also take in rescues; we currently have an angora, and two mini lops.

Rabbit Clubs

- There are rabbit clubs throughout Victoria. The Australian National Rabbit Council Inc (ANRCI). Rabbit Breeders Association of Victoria (RBAV); Northern County Rabbit Club and The Victorian Rabbit Association Inc (TVRA).
- At one stage most Australian Clubs were affiliated but now there are not few.
- Unfortunately, some people join clubs, but do not show their rabbits but use their affiliation to sell "show quality" rabbits. This is a misuse of the club membership.
- we do have a requirement to attend three shows a year or rings cannot be bought to try and stop this from happening.

Registrations

- It would be amazing to have a form of registration. I am sure everyone would welcome a registry and happy to help if we can.

- There are currently no registrations with council, breeders do not need to have a registration to breed, hence this is contributing to overpopulation and so many backyard breeders.
- Due to the sheer number of rabbits, I am not sure how a registry would work but we are losing purebred Breeds at a rapid pace. We can never get these breeds back in Australia as we have not been able to import since 1986 apart from commercial meat breeds from NZ, which none of us would like to do 😞.

Breeding

- We only breed enough to keep the breed in existence as unfortunately once breeds are gone in Australia then they are gone for good.
- We go by the British Rabbit Council protocols, so we buy rings and tattoo numbers that are then distributed to our stud so the rabbits we ring are the only ones registered to that number.
- We do ring or tattoo our rabbits so they can be traced.
- We print out info packs and offer lifetime support with all our buns and take back and rehome any that may no longer be able to care for them.
- We also do free nail trims, worm and lice and mite treatments and health checks for any of our bred buns.

Rabbits sold as Pets by Breeders

- If a rabbit is sold to a pet home the ring is removed so it is no longer trackable for that animal.
- With the tattoos, if a bunny is pet homed then the pet is tattooed in the opposite ear (numbing gel and cream is used).
- We give out info sheets with any rabbits we rehome, which is not many, as we have rare breeds.

Code of Practise

- The Rabbit Breeders Association in Victoria are affiliated with the British Rabbit Council and use their rules and guidelines in Australia.

[Rabbit Codes of Practice - The British Rabbit Council](#)

Adapting these codes to an Australian context would be a simple solution and easy to implement.

Summary & Outcome for Rabbit Breeders Association

Breeders Associations regard themselves as having a professional approach to husbandry and care and would like to separate their activities from backyard breeders. This can be achieved through the adoption of a code of practice for breeding rabbits.

As well as the registration of all breeders, the code should address husbandry, housing, and care, as well as the minimum and maximum age of rabbits to be bred, and the number of times a rabbit can breed per year, the recovery period in-between pregnancy and the maximum number of rabbits per breeder.

A code would also address those few breeders who bring their industry into disrepute and help to address the backyard breeding problem.

For example, in America, two breeders registered with the American Rabbit Breeders Association (USA) were found to have 400 and 200 rabbits living in terrible conditions. The rabbits were being bred for show, sale, and snake food. Lack of codes enable these practices to occur amongst breeders.

Appendix C

CAUSES OF OVERPOPULATION STILL TO BE ADDRESSED

When addressing the issue of overpopulation of pet rabbits, the following areas all need to be addressed, as they all contribute to overpopulation and welfare neglect of the pet rabbit.

BACKYARD BREEDERS

Inexperienced backyard breeders often cause accidental litters to occur by rabbits being sold at a young age and incorrectly sexed. A “pair of girls” or “a pair of boys” purchased from a backyard breeder or pet shop will often be found with babies after a few months. Usually, backyard breeders sell via pet shops or online. Often people will rescue rabbits from the appalling conditions seen on internet sites and occasional pet shops by purchasing them; however, this enables the continuance of these practices.

Backyard breeding for food: Breeding pet giant breeds and pet lop eared breeds for human consumption with no permit or license is also a common practice, particularly amongst some cultural groups where this practice is accepted in their country of origin.

MARKETS

Pet rabbits are stuffed into bags in markets and sent home as food for snakes or human consumption.

PETTING ZOOS & CHILDREN’S FARMS

Petting zoos and Children’s Farms like to show baby animals. The baby rabbits are often traumatized by youngsters running after them. What happens to the animals once they mature?

RABBITS IN SCHOOLS

In the guise of “education” one establishment breeds over 700 baby rabbits each year. The business model is to present to primary schools a mother rabbit with babies to show children the “miracle of life”. Teachers are instructed to inspect the litter daily prior to class so that school children will not be presented with the miracle of death. After the contracted period of a month or so the farm wishes to dispose of the litter by selling their rabbits cheaply to make room for cuter younger babies, often using high pressure sales tactics such as telling children that the animals will be killed if they don’t buy them for a few dollars.

Pets on the Move runs such a program in schools where a mother rabbit and her two-day

old babies are put into primary schools. When the babies are weaned, the children are pressured to take the babies' home.

This is irresponsible, encourages impulse buying and certainly is not in the best interest of the animal. With advances in technology, the school can give the children a valuable learning experience through visiting animal shelters, videos, or other such methods.

ANIMAL STUDIES COURSES

Some animal studies courses also encourage breeding of the animals with disregard to the baby rabbits. Students are encouraged to breed as part of their course with no concern for the animals after the course is completed. The same knowledge and skill base can be achieved through other teaching methods such as video conference, research, lectures etc. or visiting an animal shelter/rescue to experience the same.

Government Sanctioned Programs like the educational subject "*ACMGAS304A - Carry out simple breeding procedures*" requires a student to breed an animal. This same experience can be achieved by a student fostering a pregnant animal from a shelter or volunteering with a registered breeder rather than adding to the number of animals being bred, with no plan for the animal's permanent home.

Qualifications that include this unit are Diploma of Animal Technology; Certificate III in Companion Animal Services; Certificate III in Animal Technology; Certificate III in Animal Studies.

SCHOOL CHILDREN BREEDING RABBITS

We regularly hear of children breeding rabbits in clusters centered in primary schools. This is due to discussions amongst the children without guidance about the consequences for the rabbit over its 10-year lifespan. Most rabbits are disposed of when they become teenagers and will be dead within a year.

This practice is encouraged by parents and teachers, where half of the class are breeding rabbits. A common way children and others sell rabbits is through internet sites. If the rabbits don't sell, then pet shops are approached.

INTERNET: GUMTREE

Advertisements for rabbits on other internet sites such as Gumtree show the appalling conditions that rabbits are kept in with small poorly maintained enclosures. The animals sit in centimeters of fecal matter, with no clean hay or water.