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# FREE FEEDING

## For the Control of Rabbits

By C. MARSHALL, Field Superintendent, Vermin Control Branch

**I**N common with most other farm work, the control of rabbits calls for a high degree of skill, patience and perseverance. There is no short cut to success, and if results are required we must be prepared to give of our best. Failures of control works are experienced at various times, and the reasons can generally be traced back to something we have failed to do or some short cut we have tried to take. However, we should not lose heart from one failure. During normal farming procedure, if a farmer's crop fails he does not give up planting in the future; in fact he tends to increase his efforts. The same should apply to rabbit control.

The free-feeding of rabbits prior to laying poisoned bait has often been the subject of heated discussions between farmers and V.C.Os. In recent years, following the introduction of "1080" poison, we have seen a steady build-up of resistance from a section of the landholders who claim that free-feeding as recommended by this Department is unnecessary. This attitude has disrupted the efforts of our organisation and generally has helped to break down a well-established and very necessary procedure for successful control work.

In advocating free-feeding, the Protection Board is not trying to introduce its own private theories, but a procedure that has been tried and recommended by farmers, technicians and research workers all over Australia—in fact all over the world. Free-feeding does not apply to rabbits alone. Experiments have proved conclusively that in planning the destruction of most animals by the use of poison baiting, free-feeding greatly improves the final results. In the case of rabbits it is a *must*.

In W.A. we recommend free-feeding for three days, then miss one day before baiting. The entire operation covers five days. The reason for this is to allow for all free-feed to be cleaned up before laying the poisoned bait.

### WHY DO WE FREE-FEED?

All wild animals are naturally timid and therefore suspicious of anything strange.

They also have set habits when feeding, and the rabbit usually has fairly well-defined feeding grounds. Because of this timidity the rabbit is quick to take fright if anything strange happens in the vicinity of his breeding or feeding areas. To overcome this timidity it is necessary to gain his confidence and the only way we can do this is by free-feeding.

The feed attracts a few rabbits on the first day, and providing it is maintained during the following two days, most of the rabbits in the vicinity will have developed the habit of feeding, with the result that when the bait is laid on the fifth day, a big percentage of them will take it freely.

If the same area was merely poison-baited without free-feeding, a limited number of rabbits would take the baits on the first day. Most of the remaining rabbits, after seeing their dead companions, would become suspicious and refuse the baits—in fact they may leave the area temporarily until they have forgotten their fright. This upset in habit would limit the kill to a percentage far below that required to maintain successful control.

### METHOD

There is nothing complicated in free-feeding and the techniques have changed very little over the years. Successful free-feeding is well within the ability of all farmers to achieve. No costly equipment is required—just time and patience.

The following procedures should be followed:—

Have a good look over the area to be treated; locate the rabbits, also their harbourage and feeding grounds—this is important.

Then proceed to cut your trail between the feeding grounds and the harbourage, also around the harbourage where possible. Make sure you cover all infested areas; do not ignore small pockets—these too are important.

Your trail should be a clean-cut furrow about 4 in. wide and 1½ to 2 in. deep. A disc implement makes an ideal trail.

Sprinkle your free-feeding material along this trail. If using oats, the time of laying is not important; if using soft baits such as cut apple, try to leave the laying until the afternoon.

For the first day lay about 6 lb. to 8 lb. of free-feeding to the mile of trail. This amount is sufficient for a light rabbit population. If you feel the rabbits are more numerous, use up to 12 lb. of material per mile.

For the second day be guided by the amount of free feed untouched in the trail. If all is taken, increase the amount accordingly. If taken in patches, re-feed these spots.

The same procedure is followed during the third day. The important point to remember is this—if the

feed is taken freely increase the amount each day. If not taken, do not add to the material already in the trail.

Miss the fourth day; do not go near the trail.

Bait on the fifth day laying about two-thirds of the amount used for the last free-feed. Do not lay bait over untouched free-feed. Bait all the bare patches in your trail. This is where the rabbits are feeding. It could be helpful in some cases to re-cut the trail before baiting. However, if this is done, care should be taken to closely follow the original trail.

Care should be taken to see that all materials used are clean and fresh; also that water and containers are not contaminated. Rabbits are most particular, and will not eat unclean food.

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The paddock system is definitely the best for raising pigs under Western Australian conditions and should be adopted in full or in part according to the acreage available.

It takes at least one acre per sow to keep all pigs grazing when the progeny are marketed at baconer weight. If there is not this much land available, keep the growing pigs from weaner to baconer, in intensive pens, preferably on deep litter, and use the area saved on grazing paddocks for the mated sows which benefit most from the exercise and the grazing.

The fundamental aim of the paddock system is to provide fresh clean ground for all pigs, preferably with a grazing crop. This aim is achieved by having sufficient paddocks to allow them to be cultivated and rested in turn after use. The cultivation of pig paddocks is very important and serves a double purpose as the aeration of the soil destroys disease producing organisms and accelerates the liberation of the fertiliser value of the pig manure to the crop.

Getting started on the paddock system should be no problem, as the pigs will clear the ground for you, particularly low scrub or bracken. As they are very good at ring-barking trees of all sizes, remember to protect the trunks of shade trees with a length of netting or some form of tree guard. A rubbing post fitted with a sack soaked in sump oil will provide them with an alternative entertainment to the trees and will keep their skins healthy and free from parasites.



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