

# LORD HOWE ISLAND BOARD

## Business Paper

### OPEN SESSION

#### **ITEM**

Lord Howe Island Rodent Eradication Project (REP) Implementation.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Board:

1. Note the update to the project.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The REP is now well advanced in *Stage Three: Implementation and evaluation of the eradication plan*.

Stage Three involved delivery of the eradication plan. Key elements were:

- Finalise detailed logistics and operational planning including Property Management Plans
- Assemble and train remaining resources
- Finalise construction of captive management facilities for the woodhen and currawong
- Capture of woodhens and currawongs
- Operational readiness check
- Implementation of ground and aerial baiting
- Follow up monitoring and release of woodhens and currawongs
- Maintaining an ongoing biosecurity and rodent detection monitoring network.

#### **CURRENT POSITION**

An update on elements that have changed or advanced since the previous meeting is provided below.

##### **1) Rodent Activity, Baiting and Monitoring**

In July, in addition to the 22,000 bait stations in the ground baiting network, a Rapid Eradication Assessment Monitoring Grid (REAMG) was installed. The REAMG is comprised of 2348 monitoring devices installed on a 30m x 30m grid across the ground baiting network. It is designed to provide a high degree of confidence of eradication success within the ground-baiting network when activated for a prescribed duration following last known rodent presence. Targeted and intensive rodent removal efforts have greatly benefited from the detections on the REAMG.

Detections have been immediately followed up with biosecurity dog searches, additional toxic bait replenishment and placement, and trapping efforts. This is an extremely successful methodology that has proven valuable in detecting and removing rodents and dens before the young mature. Detector dogs are also valuable in detecting and removing any rodents not interacting with monitoring devices, or in detecting rodents in an area where monitoring devices have indicated rodent activity.

Following a detection on the REAMG, a live rat was detected and killed by a detector dog team on 16 Sept 2019. On 9<sup>th</sup> Oct, three relatively fresh rat carcasses (~3 days old) were found by a detector dog team in one small location. All had substantial amounts of bait in their stomach contents.

To increase the certainty around success of the project, an operational decision was made at this point in consultation with the expert advisory panel and the project Steering Committee to extend the REAMG for another 6 weeks past the scheduled end of baiting (1 Nov 2019). Concurrently a decision was made to invest in additional rodent detection dog and handler capacity during this time to increase search and detection effort in the settlement area. This has provided capacity to conduct multiple property searches over a reduced duration, conduct searches on properties with multiple dogs, and concurrently search adjacent properties. These techniques all provide increased likelihood of detecting any remaining rodents, and, with information from the REAMG, provide much greater confidence that no rodents are present.

The additional monitoring and dog searches have not uncovered confirmed evidence of rodents since finding the three carcasses on 9 Oct 2019. Monitoring and dog searches will continue until 13 Dec 2019.

Several reports of potential rodent sightings have been received by the Board over the last few months. All of these have been investigated intensively and again no confirmed evidence of rodents has been detected.

The time since last detection, combined with monitoring and search effort applied provides a high level of confidence that the LHI REP has achieved its goal of rodent eradication (i.e. removal of every remaining individual rodent on the island). It should be noted however that success cannot be declared until intensive monitoring with no rodent detections is repeated two years after the completion of aerial baiting (Aug 2021).

## **2) Captive Management Update**

### Bird Health

Birds have generally remained healthy in captivity with isolated incidents managed by Taronga staff. Since the previous report two woodhens have died as a result of injuries sustained through cage mate trauma. Whilst these deaths in captivity are unfortunate, it should be remembered that a normal wild population has regular deaths.

Woodhen breeding activity has commenced and Taronga staff are taking active measures to disturb and discourage breeding.

No further deaths of currawongs in captivity occurred since the previous update.

### Scheduled release:

As reported previously, ten Currawongs fitted with radio tracking devices were released on 2 Sept. Tracking showed all birds were alive and well after 2 weeks and a decision was then made to release the rest of the currawongs. All birds have been released at point of capture between 21<sup>st</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> Sept and appear to have settled well. Some breeding has been observed.

48 mountain woodhens were released back to point of capture on Mt Lidgbird, Mt Gower and Big Slope on the 14<sup>th</sup> Nov 2019 by an OEE, Taronga Zoo and LHIB team. Some mating behaviours were immediately observed.

Ten sentinel woodhens were released at capture locations around the Waste Management Facility precinct on the 18<sup>th</sup> Nov. Bait had been removed from this area more than 10 days earlier. These birds will be monitored for two weeks before recapture to take blood samples for brodifacoum before releasing the rest of the settlement birds (~6 Dec 2019).

### **3) Pack down and demobilisation**

The last day of scheduled baiting occurred on 1<sup>st</sup> Nov and pack down of the bait station grid and associated equipment commenced on 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov and was completed on 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov 2019. This was a mammoth task.

The REP pack down team has now commenced cleaning bait stations for on-selling to the Waiheke Island eradication project in New Zealand.

Stocktake of remaining equipment has occurred ready for divestment and disposal. There may be some items available to the community through expression of interest / bidding process.

Options for the Captive Management Facility are presented in a separate paper.

### **4) Community Engagement Update**

Information continues to be provided to the community and visitors via householders, newsletters, The Signal and information sheets for all arriving passengers. This includes specific information to chicken and livestock owners regarding reintroduction.

The community should be applauded for their contribution to the success of the project.

The Conservation Volunteers 2019 program has been completed. The program's value was evidenced best through recognition in the recent Lonely Planet Top 5 Destination listing.

### **5) Transitions to Biosecurity**

The REP team continues to provide assistance to the Environment and Community Services unit in finalising immediate biosecurity actions (such as the permanent surveillance network) and developing capability before the REP expertise departs. Additional information will be provided to the community over the coming weeks and months.

### **6) Staffing**

The vast majority of the project team will finish on either 1 Dec or 15 Dec. Remaining tasks are being handed over to the Environment and Community Services unit.

### **7) Regulatory Compliance**

Communications and reporting has continued with various regulators and the Environment Protection Authority conducted another site visit in early November. No concerns were raised. Final post baiting reporting will be completed soon.

### 8) Masked Owl Eradication

A total of 15 Masked Owl carcasses have been found to date. A few birds persist and will be hunted over the coming months, particularly once providence petrels depart the island.

### 9) Risk Mitigation and Monitoring

The final round of environmental sampling is currently being conducted with results expected in the next few weeks. This includes samples of seawater, freshwater, groundwater, soil, pasture, milk, eggs and fish.

Non-target species (NTS) searches began on 13 June 2019 when the first aerial bait drop had been completed. Searches were conducted every two days until weekly walks began in the Northern Hills from 10/07/2019 and from 28/07/2019 on the remaining walks. Weekly walks continued for four months from the commencement of baiting. Total NTS searches covered 243.5 ha of PPP and involved 565.5 person-hours. Walks involved two people walking at a slow pace (approximately 2 km per hour) along the designated tracks with each person searching either the left or right side only. The additional search area within the bait-station grid was searched during regular servicing of bait-stations.

No non target species mortality has been recorded since the last report. The threshold for mitigation activities to be implemented was not reached for any permit listed non target species (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1** Permit listed non-target species, their threshold number, and the cumulative total found to have died from Brodifacoum poisoning within survey areas.

Species	Threshold	Total Found
Golden Whistler	20	1
Silvereye	40	2
Lord Howe Currawong	8	4
Buff-banded Rail (Settlement)	103	49
Buff-banded Rail (PPP)	2	0
Purple Swamphen	12	2
Australian Kestrel	3	0
Sacred Kingfisher (PPP)	3	0
Sacred Kingfisher (Settlement)	93	0
Pacific Black Duck	2	0

### 10) Budget

The budget has been regularly reviewed and adjusted over the past months. The CEO continues to work with the broader Department on solutions for the budget shortfall.

### SUMMARY

The baiting phase of the project is nearing completion with focus on monitoring and packdown. The project will then move into a biosecurity surveillance and rodent monitoring phase over the next 18 months. Biodiversity benefits monitoring will continue over that time.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Board:

1. Note the update to the project

**Prepared:** Andrew Walsh, Rodent Eradication Project Manager

**Endorsed:** Peter Adams, Chief Executive Officer