

# **LORD HOWE ISLAND BOARD**

## **Business Paper**

### **OPEN SESSION**

#### **ITEM**

Lord Howe Island Rodent Eradication Project (REP) update.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Board:

1. Note the update to the project.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The REP active baiting phase is now complete. As of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2019 the REP pack down was finalized and we began moving toward ongoing monitoring, improved biosecurity measures, surveillance and reporting with the overall aim to declare eradication success in August 2021.

Key achievements since December include:

- Completion of pack down;
- Installation of 330+ permanent monitoring devices at LHI jetty, aerodrome and other identified areas on Island to implement the Biosecurity Monitoring Network, undertaking ongoing checks of high priority areas weekly and fortnightly with the entire monitoring grid checked monthly and have reviewed staff and resource requirements to undertake biosecurity inspections, monitoring and capacity to respond to incursions;
- Release of remaining captive Woodhen to their capture sites;
- Reintroduction of chickens;
- Sale and back loading of rodent bait stations to Waiheke Island;
- Negotiate purchase and arrange reintroduction of cattle to the Island; and
- Ongoing review of financial options.

The project is continuing to undertake the Biodiversity Benefits Monitoring using DPIE staff. Negotiations are ongoing with the Foundation for Australia's Most Endangered (FAME) to secure funding for this activity.

#### **CURRENT POSITION**

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

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

The last sign of rodent was on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

The Board have investigated over 45 “Rat On A Rodent” reports. Fifteen of these reports required further evidence collection. No positive rodent sign was detected for any report to date. The Board have been conducting ongoing inspections using detection dogs of freight brought in on the Island Trader (8 voyages + 3 special voyages in 2020) and freight planes as well as inspections of luggage from passenger planes. There is a general increase in surveillance/inspection activities both pre border and post border. The Board have conducted 11 pre border inspections (during 2020) at Birdon wharf facility, Port Macquarie for each loading of LH Sea freight with LHIB Biosecurity Dog Handler and detection dog. This includes servicing all bait stations and other detection devices, prophylactic treatments for invertebrates, training of stevedores, suppliers and carriers.

Due to travel restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic the Board have suspended sending their staff to conduct biosecurity inspections at Port Macquarie. To cover this essential service one of the Boards biosecurity dog handlers remained in Port Macquarie for the two voyages dated 26 March and 2 April 2020 to train a contractor with experience in biosecurity and dog handling who has dogs trained in our target scents. This contract is awarded until 30 June 2020. Servicing of rodent monitoring devices at Port Macquarie is detecting rodents (House Mouse and Black Rat) on every visit, including detection of rodents from within the Birdon shed. This includes sign of rodents eating rodenticide blocks within stations, live capture and droppings. This highlights the need to continue pre-border inspections and continue to improve biosecurity measures post REP, including improvements to the existing facilities at Port Macquarie and Lord Howe Island.

The time since last detection, combined with monitoring and search effort applied provides a high level of confidence that the REP has achieved rodent eradication. It should be noted however that success will not be declared until intensive monitoring with no rodent detections is repeated two years after the completion of aerial baiting (Aug 2021).

## **2) Staffing**

The Board has engaged a Field Officer 16 hours per week to assist with biosecurity surveillance and has contracted Simon Pahor to undertake internal and external audits of the Board’s biosecurity operations and plans. Dion Fabbro was contracted to develop a phone App to record and manage biosecurity monitoring & surveillance information and sync with GIS giving us the ability to track biosecurity checks etc. The phone App has improved the accuracy of data collection and significantly reduced the time required to formally record data.

The current administration staff employed through the REP are due to terminate at the end of April 2020, which will have a significant impact on coordinating outstanding tasks, particularly the importation of cattle. If approved, their extension would allow critical tasks to be finalized including return of livestock.

Simon Pahor has been contracted to undertake an external audit of the Boards biosecurity operations, the Birdon facility and education/awareness opportunities. This audit will be completed by 30 June 2020 and will include handover notes for any future Biosecurity Team Leader to be able to continue biosecurity improvements.

All remaining tasks are being taken on by the Environment and Community Services unit.

### **3) Masked Owl Eradication**

Since December 2019 one female Masked Owl was shot by local hunters at Old Settlement. It is thought this is the owl that was roosting at Kims Lookout and hunting the northern hills and settlement. Due to Covid-19, Pestlures were not able to return for a final visit under their contract. Owl kills of birds are assisting to determine any location where remaining Masked Owls are persisting/hunting. Board staff with firearms licenses will continue to target Masked Owl and respond to reports by the community.

### **4) Risk Mitigation and Monitoring**

The final round of fish sampling is due and results will be reported to the community once available from the laboratory.

Monitoring in order to declare eradication success is an identified task to be conducted in late 2021. Planning should be conducted by an external expert as early as possible to ensure robust methodology and facilitate the securing of required staff and contractors. However, there is currently no budget available for this. Failure to conduct the success check in a defensible and timely manner would be a significant concern and would result in a range of ongoing impacts..

### **5) Budget**

Current expenditure on the REP projects have been limited to tasks that are deemed absolutely necessary to maintain a minimum level of integrity of rodent biosecurity on the island. This has resulted in a significant increase in workload on the ECS team and this is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term without running the risk of staff burnout. Diversion of staff resources to deliver the post eradication phase of the REP has also resulted in delays to the delivery of other ECS programs such as the Community Strategic Plan, Land Administration, DA services, and track maintenance.

The Manager Environment and Community Services and CEO have been working with senior DPIE staff to secure financial assistance to cover the significant REP budget shortfall. A funding proposal to address the REP funding shortfall has been developed by KPMG. In addition a Biosecurity Pilot funding proposal that includes funding for the key post REP eradication activities relating to ongoing biosecurity has been prepared. It is designed to address risk of the REP project outcomes being lost due to re-incursion or other biosecurity threats. The Biosecurity Funding Proposal was submitted to Treasury in March.

Should an alternate funding source fail to be secured the Board will be able to maintain a minimum level of Biosecurity with existing resources for the short term. Maintenance of medium and long term biosecurity service levels will either require a reduction in service levels in other ECS activities or a significant increase in risk appetite for incursions should the Board choose to reduce resources currently allocated to maintain REP biosecurity.

### **SUMMARY**

The baiting phase of the project is complete and the project is moving towards an improved biosecurity surveillance and rodent monitoring phase aiming to declare eradication success by August 2021. Biodiversity benefits monitoring will continue over that time. The Board are continuing to seek funding to address the budget shortfall.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Board:

1. Note the update to the project

**Prepared:** Hank Bower, Manager Environment & World Heritage

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