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Committee Catchment Management  
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## Review of the Regional Possum and Predator Control Programme within the Wellington region

### 1. Purpose

To seek Council approval to bring forward funding of \$100,000 from the Bovine Tb Reserve in 2010/11 to enable an earlier start to the Regional Possum / Predator Control programme (RPPCP) in areas recently declared bovine Tb free.

### 2. Significance of the decision

The matters requiring decision in this report have been considered by officers against the requirements of Part 6 of the Local Government Act 2002.

Officers have considered the significance of the matter, taking into account the Council's significance policy and decision-making guidelines. Officers recommend that the matter be considered to have low significance.

### 3. Background

In March 2008 the Catchment Management Committee was asked to provide guidance for a future strategic direction for the control of possums and other predators within the Wellington Region.

Report 08.137 identified that Animal Health Board (AHB) cessation of vector control would significantly affect the density of possums and other predators in affected parts of the region. Significant biodiversity benefits are evident if regular, sustained possum and predator control is implemented. Therefore, GW needed to determine the extent of the replacement control programme to maintain the gains realised by the bovine Tb vector control.

Report 08.137 provided seven options for possible future control programmes. These ranged from "do nothing" (option 1) to GW managed possum and predator control programme (option 7), with an additional focus on high biodiversity value sites (high quality native ecosystems). Option 7 was recommended by staff as the optimal option for maintaining the social, economic and biodiversity gains of the Tb programme. This option also supported the GW objective in the Regional Policy Statement of protecting and

enhancing biodiversity throughout the region with a particular focus on threatened ecosystems.

Committee recommendation following a discussion of report 08.137 included:

- That staff report back on costs, benefits and funding options of the preferred option or options (1 to 7).
- Approval to commence a public consultation programme based on options 5, 6 and 7 of the report.

In July 2008, report 08.518 was presented to the Committee summarising the results of community consultation. Consultation occurred with over 600 affected landowners, and also included other strategies such as press releases, email distributions and individual phone calls. Despite landowner response being low, there was overwhelming support for the introduction of a Regional Possum Predator Control Programme (RPPCP) with option 7 receiving the highest level of support:

- Option 5        7% support
- Option 6        28% support
- Option 7        62% support

The consultation documents also included a proposal to implement control over 60,000ha in the west of the region where no bovine Tb control had occurred in the past.

The consultation indicated the community was prepared to support funding a programme of significant size.

Various alternatives were considered to fund the proposed RPPCP. Funding options considered the following alternatives:

- Uniform annual charge
- Land area rate and uniform annual charge
- Regional rate

At the meeting on 4 September 2008 the Committee supported the recommendations of report 08.604, and proposed the following expenditure for the RPPCP:

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
\$1.296M	\$1.539M	\$1.785M	\$1.462M	\$1.916M	\$1.782M

Note that the above costs included undertaking new work in the western parts of the region, and control in Tb free areas which are largely located in northern Wairarapa.

To ensure the RPPCP could commence within the Region, the rules of the current Regional Pest Management Strategy 2002-2022 (RPMS) were amended during the five year review and now includes the following statement:

*“GW shall support the establishment of new possum control programmes, in collaboration with landowners, in areas which have historically received bovine Tb vector control and now meet the AHB criteria to be declared Tb free”.*

During 2009 the world-wide financial crisis and the recession affecting New Zealand forced Council to re-consider future expenditure. As a result the funding for RPPCP was significantly reduced. Funding for some monitoring was allowed for the 2010/11 year followed by a moderate level of control commencing in 2011/12. The following financial commitments were included in the current LTCCP and subsequent Annual Plans:

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
\$0.0M	\$0.03M	\$0.19M	\$0.194M	\$0.301M	\$0.495M

The decision to defer and reduce funding for the RPPCP has had the following negative effects:

- 1 Removed the likelihood of possum control in the western side of the region in near future;
- 2 Excluded funding required for additional control in high biodiversity value areas and support for existing KNE sites (e.g. Mt Bruce Pukaha)
- 3 Significantly delayed proposed control within the AHB Tb free areas.

The likely effect is a deterioration of biodiversity in threatened ecosystems and gradual loss of the benefits realised through the bovine Tb vector control programme.

### 3.1 AHB Tb Free areas

In June 2008, AHB vector control was removed from over 18,700ha. The Residual Trap Catch index (RTC – number of possums caught per 100 trap nights - used as a possum population density indicator) for these areas generally ranged from 0.3% to 1.7%.

Bovine Tb freedom declaration will occur over several years.

Hectares	Tb freedom declared
18,748	June 2008
18,720	June 2010
11,290	June 2011
35,014	June 2012
<b>83,772</b>	<b>Total area</b>

Under the current LTCCP, no possum control will occur in these areas for at least three years from cessation of control. Over this timeframe the area will be subject to an increasing possum population due to breeding and reinvasion. A clustering of possums is expected to occur within the most favourable sites, which will increase the negative biodiversity impacts.

### **3.2 Significance of the RPPCP**

The RPPCP is critical to maintain the biodiversity gains of possum reduction achieved within the AHB Tb free areas. Based on staff experience and scientific research, possum population densities of up to 5% RTC are regarded as necessary to maintain the biodiversity values and protect primary production in an area. The original RPPCP was costed to maintain populations at approximately RTC 5% with minimal control inputs. Once these populations reach an RTC over 8%, considerably more control effort is required, resulting in significantly higher cost of control.

Where populations exceed RTC 5.0% a clustering of possums is expected to occur within the most favourable sites, which will increase the negative biodiversity and production impacts. We can expect a greater variance in line numbers within these areas, with perhaps individual lines exceeding 15 to 20% (high possum population density). After three years of no possum control it is expected that the RTC index will increase to 5% with further increases of 4-8% annually in subsequent years. A further compounding issue is a secondary breeding season which occurs when conditions are favourable. This is expected to be a factor in causing rapidly rising RTC indexes and has been identified in field experiences throughout AHB operational areas. To prevent the possum population increasing to an RTC of 12-15% in the areas which AHB control ceased in June 2008, it is imperative that possum control is not delayed any longer.

Increased possum populations will also have a migration effect on neighbouring areas under the AHB programmes causing an increased possum population resulting in greater frequency of control and higher costs.

### **3.3 Proposed Works Programme and Funding**

The programme proposes setting up a permanent bait station grid throughout all rollback areas with spacing ranging between 1 per 4 to 10 hectares, dependant on habitat. Each station will be re-baited a minimum of twice per year. Approximately 11,120 bait stations will be required.

Some possum monitoring is proposed to determine the possum population trends and if the control inputs are sufficient to hold the possum population below an RTC of 5%.

The current strata boundaries for these projects have been developed using best practice developed through the bovine Tb control programme. Future management strategies will be based around smaller blocks and specific control requirements. The recording of control activities within GIS and databases will be critical. This information, along with RTC data, will be used to review future control methodologies.

It is expected that this possum/predator control will cost around \$130,000 if implemented in 2010/11. As only \$30,000 is available in the 2010/11 Annual Plan, it will be necessary to utilise funds held in the Bovine Tb Reserve. The Reserve currently totals \$496,700 with approximately \$112,000 being deducted annually to maintain the Bovine Tb land area rate at \$0.30 per hectare.

A review of how GW biodiversity programmes are funded will be required in the near future. A number of changes are occurring which suggest that a review is warranted:

- Commencement of the RPPCP;
- Declining possum control Reserves fund;
- Review of biodiversity delivery structures within GW;
- Changing relationship with the AHB; and
- Changes to the way the AHB implement the bovine Tb NPMS within the Wellington region.

#### **4. Communication**

The decision of Council will be communicated to affected landowners, Federated Farmers, and to the wider farming community through the Wairarapa Hill Country Advisory Committee.

#### **5. Recommendations**

*That the Committee recommends that Council:*

1. *Receives the report.*
2. *Notes the contents of the report.*
2. *Approves the inclusion of \$100,000 from the Bovine Tb Reserve into the 2010/11 Biosecurity Department Annual Plan to facilitate commencement of the Regional Possum/Predator Control Programme.*

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