

THE CITY OF
GREATER GEELONG

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT

SOUTHEAST BELLARINE COASTAL STRATEGY
COMMUNITY CONSULTATION
SEPTEMBER 2021

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Executive Summary

The City is leading the development of the Southeast Bellarine Coastal Strategy. This strategy aims to provide an overarching vision and guidance for the region, ensure the protection and enhancement of this significant environment and consider the feasibility of opportunities for the area. Threats, values and uses are being evaluated in consultation with Traditional Owners, adjacent land managers, private land holders and community to ensure the pursuing guidelines are collaboratively implemented and maintained.

This project stemmed from a high level of community interest after Ocean Grove Community Association (OGCA) organised a public forum to discuss future developments between the townships of Point Lonsdale and Ocean Grove. The forum objective was to produce a draft vision for the future of the area and an understanding of the concerns, opportunities and risks of a Southern Bellarine Coastal Trail. The community response to this proposal was varied with conflicting views due to the environmental significance of the dune, lakes, saltmarsh and woodland environs.

The City allocated \$160,000 based on a community budget bid from OGCA to develop the Southeast Bellarine Coastal Strategy. In this way extensive community consultation could be sort to provide an impartial and current collection of public view on what actions the City should take to manage this region.

Due to the complex nature of this landscape and high interest from the community, a comprehensive engagement plan was established with detailed activities to capture community and stakeholder consultation throughout the strategy development. Aimed for a collaborative approach on the API2 spectrum.

The community consultation process took place prior to and in order to inform the development of the Draft - Southeast Bellarine Coastal Strategy. This report provides a summary of the key findings and observations provided by the community during the pre-draft consultation period. Community input was sort during a 7 week period from July to September 2021.

WHAT WE HEARD

- A total of specific comments were received during the pre-draft consultation phases across all consultation options.
- Over two thirds (68%) of respondents stated that the damage caused by rabbits has increased in the past three years. Only 7% thought that impacts had decreased.
- Ninety percent of survey participants were concerned about the damage rabbits are causing to native flora and fauna.
- The majority of the comments received about rabbit problem areas identified specific City-managed reserves and roadsides of concern.
- Participants who control rabbits on their land mostly bait using pindone, perform fumigation and remove harbour.
- Views expressed about the different control methods were both positive and negative for the use of pindone. Only positive comments were received for warren destruction activities and the implementation of an integrated control program.
- Over 40% of the total comments received related to how the community could be supported to control rabbits. Most of these comments related to program facilitation and coordination (95)

- Fifty of the facilitation/coordination comments were about how the City should coordinate and partner our efforts with the community and other stakeholders. Another 22 comments mentioned the different stakeholders the City can partner with as part of our rabbit control program.
- Over a third of the 91 community education and awareness comments mentioned the importance of the messaging the City must use in regards to communication about rabbits and the harm they cause.
- Many comments suggested that the development and distribution of rabbit control factsheets would help and more community rabbit control workshops/field days need to be held.

Introduction

The Southeast Bellarine Coastal Strategy which pertains to the coastal dune system, woodlands and wetlands along the southern coast which retains some of the last remaining remnants of vegetation in the region. This landscape, which is Wadawurrung country, is intrinsically linked via water flows from Bonnyvale wetlands, through to the natural coastal wetlands of the Lake Victoria system, managed by Parks Victoria, linking through to Swan Bay. Although the area is not yet definitively defined, it relates to the 'green wedge' between the Ocean Grove and Point Lonsdale urban fringes. Bounded by Shell Road in the north, Point Lonsdale in the east, Collendina in the west and Buckley Park Foreshore Reserve in the south; but may extend further as the strategy is developed. (Appendix Two).

The project coincides with the delivery by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning Distinctive Area Landscape (DAL) Project. In 2019 the Bellarine Peninsula was declared a DAL due to the distinctive characteristics of the landscapes and the threat of over-development. The draft Statement of Planning Policy, which has just been released, aims to conserve and enhance the significant landscapes, environment, biodiversity and cultural heritage of the region. The Bellarine Peninsula Southern Coast has been identified as a state significant landscape with the remaining area also recognised as regionally significant landscape and as a biodiversity connection.

The City's Planning Scheme and Settlement Strategy recognises the green break, landscape and environmental significance of the location. Much of this area, both crown and private land, is well recognised for conservation importance and has been protected through appropriate zoning and overlays. It is expected the State Distinctive Area Landscape Policies, along with numerous City of Greater Geelong Strategies will provide guidance for the delivery of this Strategy.

Climate change presents new challenges. State and City strategies stress that biolinks and waterway connections are vital in the resilience of native plants and animals to threats including climate change impacts. The Lonsdale Lakes waterway, which is part of the Swan Bay catchment area, is a Flood Prone Area with extensive Flood Extent and Coastal Inundation overlays predicated with climate change and sea level rise. This region will play a vital role as saltmarsh communities migrate inland, and dunal systems and cliffs are further eroded due to tidal and storm surge. The barrier system of the Southern Coastal Dunes plays an important role in protection for the Point Lonsdale, Queenscliff and Ocean Grove communities and the entire southern Bellarine.

In the City's *Greater Geelong: A Clever and Creative Future* the community has set out its thirty-year vision for the Greater Geelong region. In the Clever & Creative future our community values the uniqueness and significance of natural bushland, coastlines, wetlands, rivers and beaches and we have preserved, enhanced and grown our natural areas. The Victorian Government's Biodiversity 2037 plan includes ambitious targets to stop the state's declining biodiversity and achieve a net gain in the extent and condition of habitat across the terrestrial, waterway and marine environments. This emulates the City's Environmental Strategy 2020-30 to conserve the environment and achieve a net gain of biodiversity within Greater Geelong during the term of this strategy.

The Southeast Bellarine Coastal Strategy will be developed by the City and aims to ensure the protection and enhancement of this region and consider other opportunities for the area. Opportunities for use will be investigated in line with the Shared Trails Masterplan, along with recreational, tourism and cultural heritage education options. Threats and values will be evaluated in consultation with Traditional Owners, adjacent land managers, private land holders and community to ensure the pursuing guidelines are collaboratively implemented and maintained. This project will provide an overarching vision for the Southeast Bellarine Coastal area and outline the desired outcomes and priority actions to be implemented in protecting nationally significant conservation reserves, waterways and adjacent land.

The Southeast Bellarine Coastal Strategy will:

- Establish a panel of experts and land management stakeholders to examine options for managing Buckley Park Foreshore Reserve, the Lake Victoria wetlands and surrounding land as one connected landscape.
- Examine opportunities to enhance and protect this region (blue carbon saltmarsh restoration, water flows)
- Promote first nation culture and acknowledgement of aboriginal heritage of Wadawurrung peoples
- Determine the benefits and options for acquiring privately owned environmentally significant land or supporting private landholders to enhance and protect these assets
- Assess gaps in knowledge and undertake assessments to guide management decisions
- Examine suitable opportunities for community use (outdoor education, recreation and immersion in nature)
- Examine feasibility and routes for a shared trail linking Point Lonsdale with Ocean Grove
- Assess fire risk and access
- Outline opportunities for continued volunteer community group assistance in on ground works to protect indigenous flora and fauna and increase stewardship of this land.
- Deliver progressive and final findings to community and key authorities (symposium)
- Deliver a report outlining overarching vision for area, strategy for management, recommended actions and estimated costs of implementation
- Inform policy documents such as the Biodiversity Strategy

It was imperative that the public were consulted through a variety of methods prior to the development of the Draft – Southeast Bellarine Coastal Strategy to ensure our community was involved from a very early stage.

Community Consultation

ENGAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the engagement process were to;

- To inform that the project has commenced, and a project manager has been appointed
- To consult with community and collaborate with land managers on the values, threats, uses and issues of the site
- To involve the Geelong community in developing a greater sense of stewardship of the site
- To collaborate with the Traditional Owners and land managers in the management of the area
- That the strategy is accepted by community and implemented by land management partners

INITIAL ENGAGEMENT – PHASE ONE

Activities performed:

From 26th July 2021 to 12th September 2021 engagement was sort through the following methods:

1. Have Your Say page – online survey and usage mapping tool
<https://yoursay.geelongaustralia.com.au/SBCS>
2. Online Open Houses – 24th August and 6th September
3. Phone, Email and Online Meetings – Group and individual submissions and consultations
4. Formation of a land manager working group with private HYS page

Initially the community engagement was planned to close on the 25th of August following three open houses. Due to covid lockdown impacts, the two scheduled walk-in open houses were cancelled, and the engagement timeline extended. An additional online open house opportunity was subsequently created, and the community consultation period extended by three weeks.

The survey contained questions relating to demographics and connection to this location and asked for input on current use, values, threats, future protection and future use. The usage map allowed a spatial representation of how community members currently utilise the area.

Community engagement opportunities were promoted by means of: direct email to community groups and stakeholders, print media, social media, 500x postcards, community group newsletters and HYS followers. Landholders were sent a personally addressed letter inviting them to provide input and book a meeting to discuss their unique future visions for the land and the region.

A land manager working group was formed including representatives from the following organisations:
Wadawurrung Traditional Owner Aboriginal Corporation

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning – Distinctive Area Landscape and Biodiversity Parks Victoria

Corangamite Catchment Management Authority

Borough of Queenscliffe

Barwon Coast

Barwon Water

City of Greater Geelong

Initial steps have been taken to create a strategic partnership with the Wadawurrung TOAC and align their Healthy Country Plan with the Strategy. A private Have Your Say page was established as a knowledge and idea sharing portal for the management working group. This site will be used throughout the Strategy development to create collaborations and recommendations to inform the outcomes.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION – PHASE TWO

Site tours were scheduled for early September, however due to covid restrictions these visits have been postponed and will be conducted when safe in small numbers.

Educational videos are being created to showcase the values of this area and create greater community awareness and appreciation for this significant environment. The focus of each short film (2-3min) are as follows:

1. Launch video – Drone imagery as overview of site and Mayor Stephanie Asher announcement
2. Cultural heritage and connection to country
3. Vegetation values and pest plant threats
4. Lake system and bird habitat
5. Coastal and climate change influences

Results

OVERVIEW

A total of 580 specific comments were received during the pre-draft consultation phases across all consultation options. The highest number of comments received (239) related to actions that the City could include in the Action Plan to fulfil a variety of roles to support the community. The next highest number of comments (176) identified problem locations or characteristics of rabbit prone landscapes.

Table 1: The number of comments received by category

Comments relating to...	Number of Comments
1. Rabbit damage/impacts	46
2. Problem locations	176
3. Control techniques	56
4. Community support (community education and awareness, signs, workshops, incentives, partnerships, etc.)	239
5. Control Plan development (principles, budget, etc.)	35
6. Further suggestions	28
Total number of comments received	580

COMMENTS RECEIVED

1. The problem with rabbits

Comments received about the damage rabbits cause could be broken down into rabbit behavioural traits and what is impacted by that trait (Figure 1). Almost two thirds of these comments related to the damage rabbits cause from burrowing and/or grazing. Over a third of the comments received about rabbit damage mentioned a concern about the impacts rabbits were having to native flora and fauna.

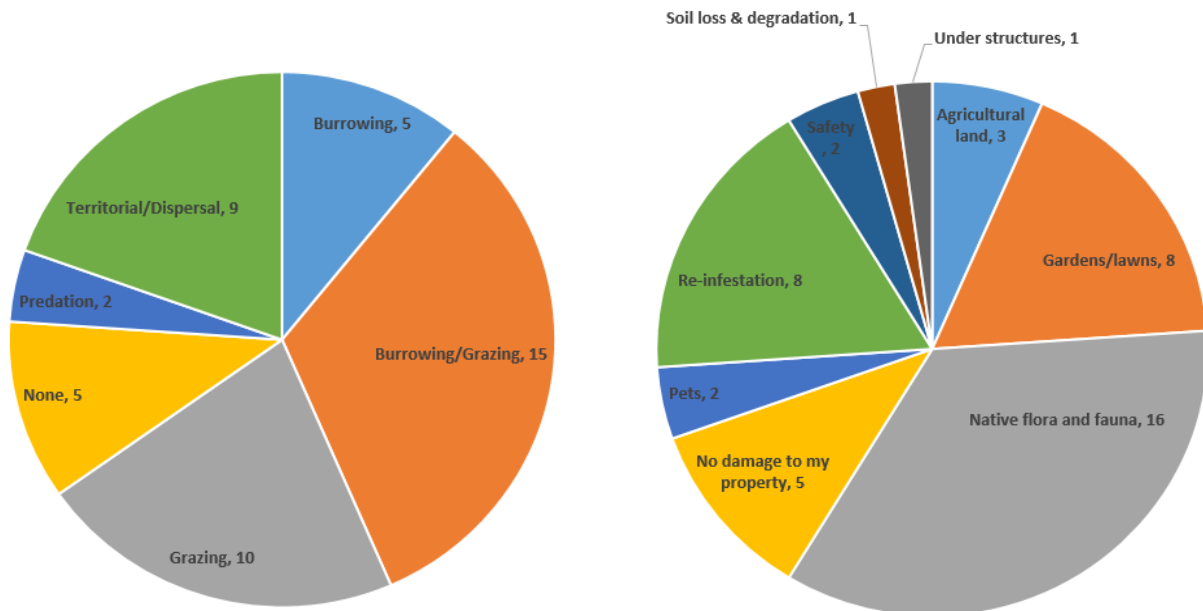


Figure 1: Rabbit problem behaviours (left) and what the behaviour is damaging (right)

Respondents were asked “Have rabbit impacts in your local area increased, decreased or remained steady compared to three years ago?” (Figure 2). Over two thirds of respondents stated that rabbit impacts have increased compared to only 7% who thought that impacts had decreased.

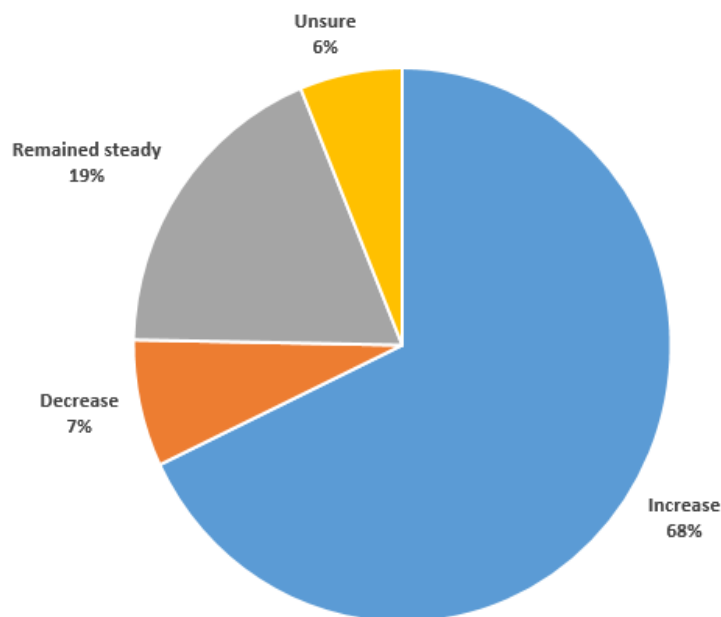


Figure 2: "Have rabbit impacts in your local area increased, decreased or remained steady compared to three years ago?"

The survey also included the question “What are your main concerns about rabbits?” followed by eight potential responses. Respondents could select as many responses as they wanted. Figure 3 (below) displays the responses received. The highest response received was “damage to natural areas” (90% of responders selected this option). The next highest responses were “rabbits not being controlled on public land” (63%) and “damage to agricultural areas” (57%). The lowest option selected (<21%) was “off-target impacts from pindone baiting”.

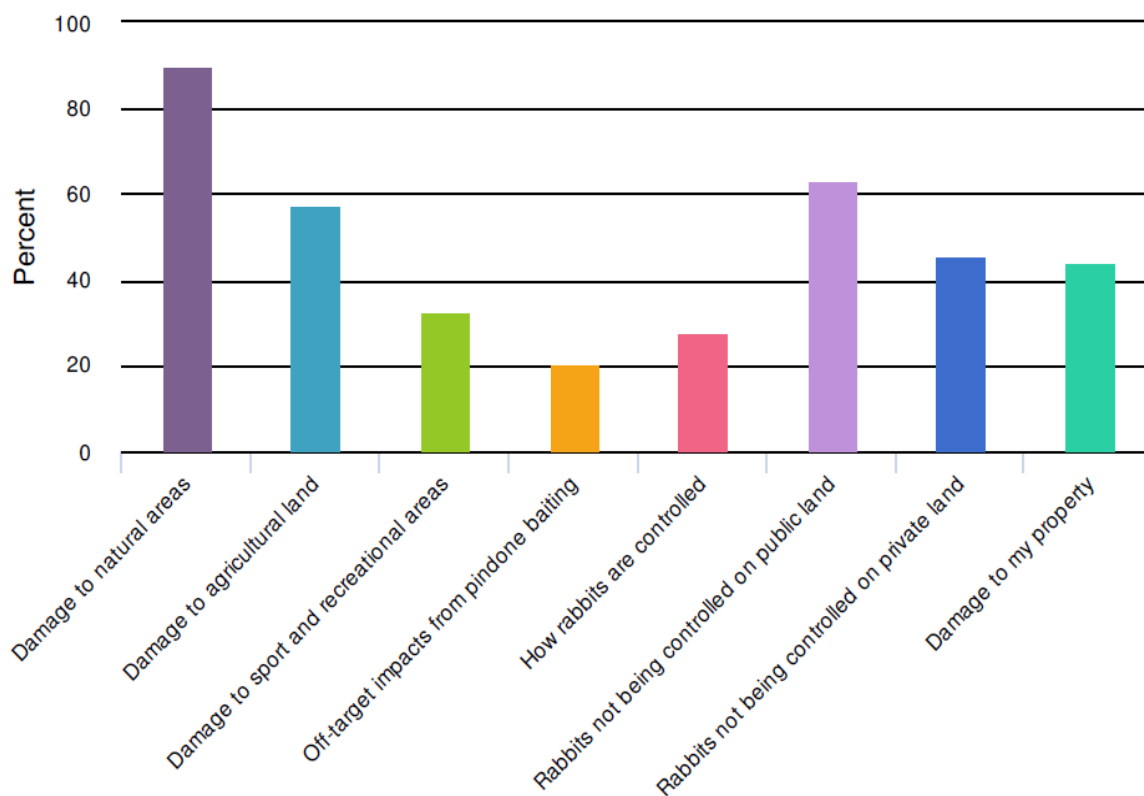


Figure 3: "What are your main concerns about rabbits?"

2. Problem locations

The 176 comments received about rabbit problem areas could be broken down into the categories identified in Table 2. Twenty-five comments were received that identified problem localities. Localities receiving more than one comment were Drysdale (5), Bellarine Peninsula (4), Wallington (4), Curlewis (2). Two-thirds of the localities identified were on the Bellarine Peninsula. Almost two thirds of the comments received mentioned rabbit problem areas on public land. The majority of the public land areas mentioned during the consultation period were City-owned and/or City-managed reserves and roadsides.

Table 2: Comments received about problem locations

Comment category	Examples	Percentage of all problem area comments
Public land	Mostly specific names of City-managed reserves and roadsides, rail reserves, etc.	63%
Localities	Bellarine Peninsula, Drysdale, etc.	15%
Private property	Absentee landholders, large farms, small lifestyle blocks, etc.	13%
General rabbit prone landscapes/habitats	Waterways, sandy soils, peri-urban areas, etc.	8%
Other	Unaware, location outside of the municipality	1%

Comments received about problem public land areas are grouped as follows:

- Public reserves - 54%
- Roadsides - 39%
- Rail Reserves (active lines) – 4%

- Other (ie. airport) – 3%

A total of 19 comments (or 33% of problem reserve comments) stated that the Bellarine Rail Trail was an issue for the City to resolve. Other reserves with several mentions were the Barwon and Moorabool River Reserve (7%), Hovells Creek, Lara (7%), Waurin Ponds Creek (5%), Basin Reserve, Drysdale (5%) and Lake Lorne/Drysdale Pony Club (5%)

Of the thirty comments received about roadsides as rabbit problem areas that mentioned a specific roadside, the highest number of comments was Knights Road, Mannerim (23%). Other roadsides with high mentions were Manifold Road, St Leonards (20%), Curlewis Road, Curlewis (13%) and Grubb Road, Wallington (13%).

3. Control Methods

Survey participants and workshop attendees were asked to list the control methods they use to control rabbits on their land (Figure 4). Pindone baiting was the highest response received (29). Fumigation (20) and harbour removal (20) were the next highest responses. It is hoped that the implementation of the Rabbit Control Plan will help to influence the number of people destroying warrens via ripping and/or implosion methods.

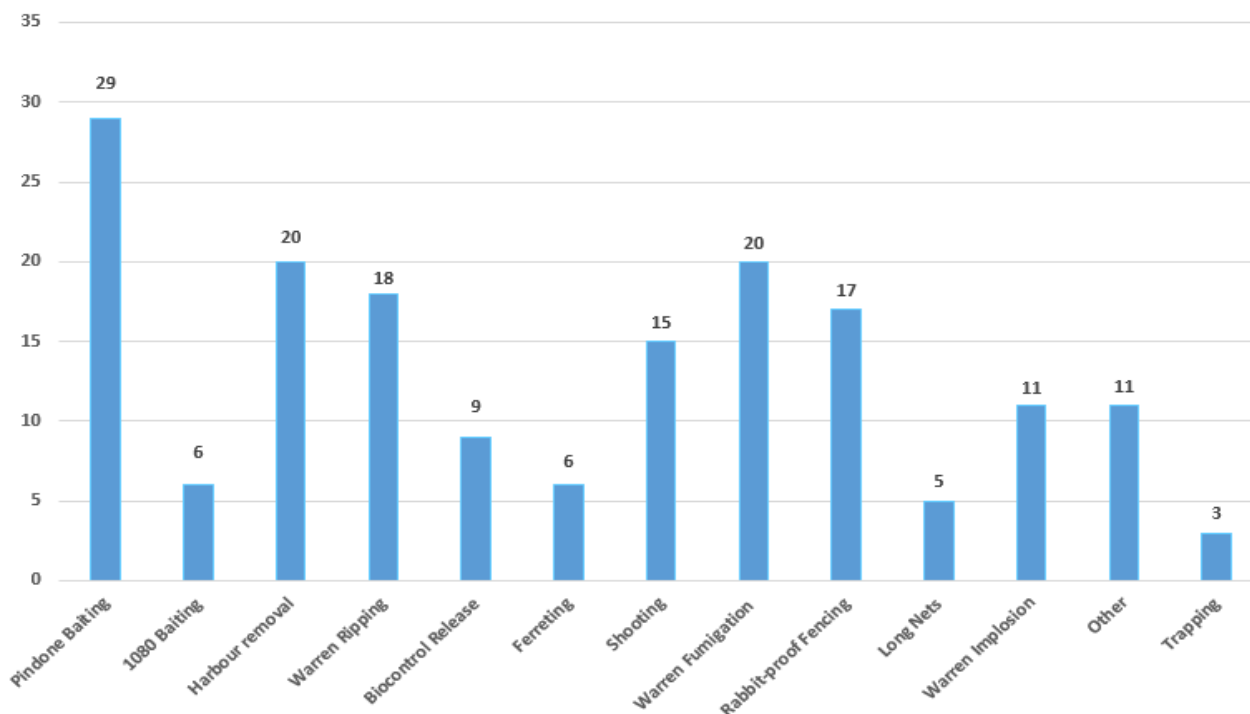


Figure 4: Number of responses to "How do you control rabbits on your land"

Participants were also asked to comment on the effectiveness of different control methods. Pindone baiting (13) and warren destruction activities (12) received the most comments (

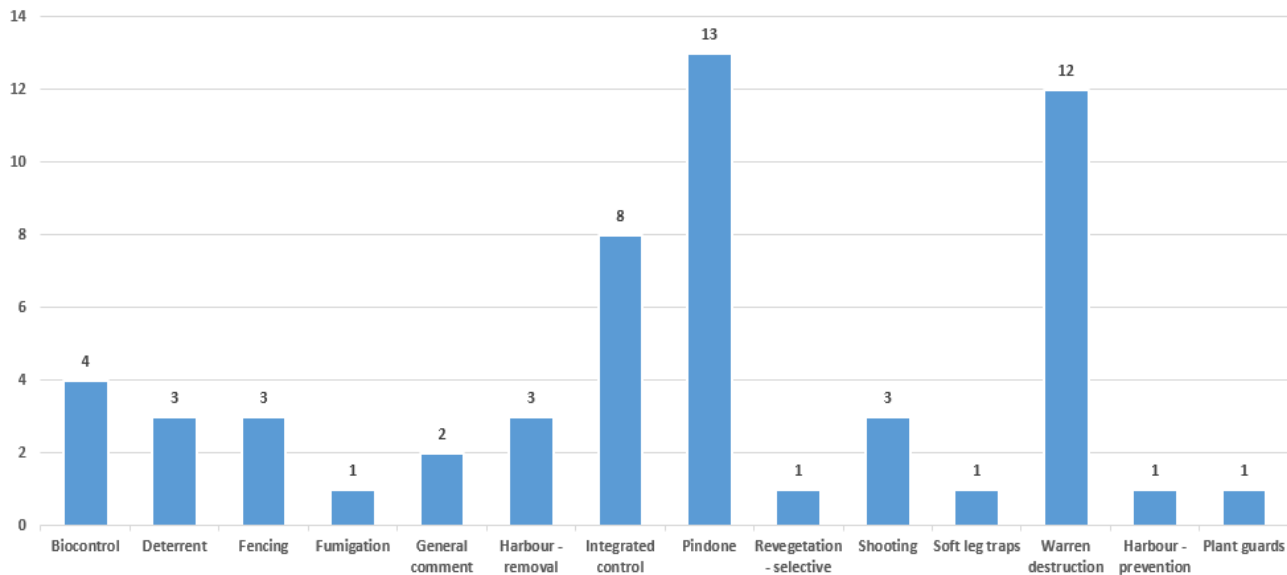


Figure 5). None of the comments about warren destruction or integrated control (8) were negative. Pindone baiting comments were the most varied. Some participants (3) raised their concerned about off-target impacts while others stated that they had noticed a large reduction in local rabbit populations from past baiting efforts.

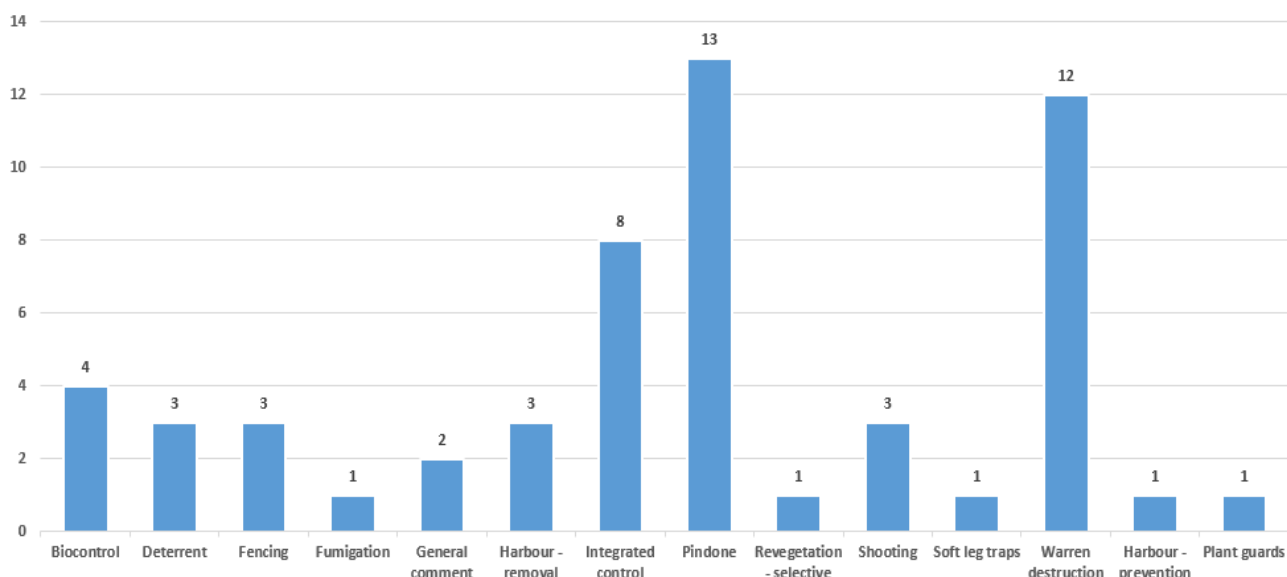


Figure 5: Comments received about the different control methods available

4. Supporting our community

Over 40% of the total comments received related to how the community could be supported to control rabbits. These comments were grouped into four categories (Over a third of the community education and awareness comments mentioned the importance of the messaging the City must use in regard to rabbits and the harm they cause. Many comments suggested that the development and distribution of rabbit control factsheets would help, and more community rabbit control workshops/field days needed to be held.

Table 3). Most of these comments related to program facilitation and coordination (95) and community education and awareness (91). Fifty of the facilitation/coordination comments were about how the City should coordinate and partner our efforts with the community and other stakeholders. Another 22 comments mentioned the different stakeholders the City can partner with as part of our rabbit control program. Providing advice and support to the community was another role requested by the community.

Over a third of the community education and awareness comments mentioned the importance of the messaging the City must use in regard to rabbits and the harm they cause. Many comments suggested that the development and distribution of rabbit control factsheets would help, and more community rabbit control workshops/field days needed to be held.

Table 3: Community support comments

Category	Number of comments
Facilitate/coordinate	95
Community education and awareness	91
Private land incentives	37
Compliance and enforcement	16
TOTAL	239

Participants provided many comments about a potential private land incentive program, and some suggested the City introduce a rate rebate. Others proposed that the City could provide funding for or subsidise the cost of pindone baiting or warren destruction activities.

Sixteen comments were received that highlighted the key role that compliance and enforcement plays in ensuring landholders control rabbits. Agriculture Victoria is responsible for overseeing and enforcing rabbit control under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*. Six comments stated that the City could introduce a local law to ensure landholders control rabbits on private land.

5. Other Control Plan development considerations

Table 4 contains the breakdown of the other comments received about the control plan (excluding community support). Participants stated that it was important for the City to take a big picture strategic approach to rabbit management. Two key principles for the Control Plan will be “Leading by example” and “Learn from the achievements of others”.

Table 4: Control Plan comments (non-community support aspects)

Category	Number of comments
Strategic planning	12
Principles – Leading by Example	6
Principles – Learn from others	6
Monitoring and reporting	4
Action Plan – importance of	4
Budget – increase rabbit control budget	3
TOTAL	35

6. Further suggestions

A range of other further suggestions (28) were provided that didn’t fit in the other sections. These were mostly statements about the development of the rabbit plan. Some commented that they were pleased that the City was developing the plan and they are happy to be involved. Others said that the City needs to hurry up and finish off the plan and get on with performing on-ground control activities.

Some of the more “left field” comments were about encouraging rabbits as a food source and that the City could neuter the rabbits so they do not breed so quickly.

Next steps

The City will use the comments provided to inform the development of the Draft - Rabbit Control Plan. It is anticipated that the Draft will be available for community consultation in 2020. This report will be an attachment when the Draft is submitted through the Council approval for consultation process. This report will also be available on the City's rabbit control section of the website.