



City of Richmond

Report to Committee

To: Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services Committee

Date: March 10, 2023

From: Todd Gross
Director, Parks Services

File: 10-6160-07-09/2023-
Vol 01

Re: Feral Rabbit Management Program

Staff Recommendation

That an integrated approach to the management of feral rabbits in Richmond including an increased public education and awareness campaign and implementation of a capture, sterilization and re-homing program, as described in the staff report titled "Feral Rabbit Management Program," dated March 10, 2023, from the Director, Parks Services, be approved.

Todd Gross
Director, Parks Services
(604-247-4942)

Att. 1

REPORT CONCURRENCE		
ROUTED TO:	CONCURRENCE	CONCURRENCE OF GENERAL MANAGER
Sustainability & District Energy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Animal Protection Services	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Purchasing	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
SENIOR STAFF REPORT REVIEW	INITIALS: 	APPROVED BY CAO

Staff Report

Origin

The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Council on the present status of feral rabbits in Richmond, to provide a summary of the results of the Feral Rabbit Management Study and to seek approval from Council on the next steps for the management of feral rabbits per the recommendations of the Study.

This report supports Council's Strategic Plan 2018-2022 Strategy #2 A Sustainable and Environmentally Conscious City:

Environmentally conscious decision-making that demonstrates leadership in implementing innovative, sustainable practices and supports the City's unique biodiversity and island ecology.

This report supports Council's Strategic Plan 2018-2022 Strategy #5 Sound Financial Management:

Accountable, transparent, and responsible financial management that supports the needs of the community into the future.

Analysis

Background

Feral rabbits are domesticated animals that have been abandoned or escaped to the outdoors, including offspring of such animals. The rabbits commonly found in Richmond are European rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), and have been classified by the Ministry of Forests as an invasive species. This problem is not unique to Richmond; feral rabbits are widespread throughout Metro Vancouver's member municipalities.

Rabbits continue to impact the community on both public and private landscapes, in a number of ways:

- **Damage to Infrastructure.** On both public and private property, rabbits cause damage to plants, turf grass, trees, and soil by burrowing, eating, and defecating in gardens and parks. Burrowing also undermines pathways, sloped areas and impact areas around structures (foundations).
- **Ecological Impact.** The adaptability, lack of natural predators and prolific breeding enable domestic feral rabbits to rapidly outcompete native species. Feral rabbits feed on a number of native plants and shrubs across Richmond which result in the damage and loss of natural habitat. Furthermore, feral rabbits have been reported in and around agricultural land. This migration could have a major impact on Richmond agricultural communities.

- **Health and Safety.** Considering their prolific nature, feral rabbits pose a health and safety risk to other wildlife, as well as Richmond residents. Feral rabbits in Richmond have been found to carry the Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD), which poses a potential threat to native rabbit species if the issue is left unchecked. Furthermore, because feral rabbits are transient and often seek out new habitable space, they often invade roadways and can pose a risk to motorists' safety.
- **Increased Rodent Activity.** Some well-meaning visitors to Richmond parks are bringing food for the feral rabbits. This is not dissimilar to residents who feed birds in public areas. The food is not always eaten immediately by the feral rabbits and the leftovers are often a food source for rodents. This, in turn, increases the potential for predation by other animals including coyotes.

Amendments to the Provincial Legislative Framework

In British Columbia, all species of the family *Leporidae* (hares and rabbits) are considered "wildlife" under Schedule A of the *Wildlife Act (the Act)*. Furthermore, the European rabbit is classified under *the Act* as a Schedule C animal which can be captured or euthanized anytime in British Columbia without a provincial license or permit as they are deemed an invasive species.

Up until spring 2022, under the previous regulatory framework, a captured feral European rabbit could not be transferred to another party (e.g., via adoption or sanctuary placement) without obtaining a provincial permit.

In spring, 2022, the Ministry of Forests changed the regulation pertaining to the capture, housing and adoption of feral rabbits (Attachment 1). The update to the Wildlife Act includes:

- a) Relocating or releasing a domestic rabbit into the wild is prohibited; and
- b) A permit is no longer required to trap feral rabbits for the purposes of relocating them for rehabilitation, to a sanctuary.

This 2022 regulatory update provides municipalities an avenue for more effective management of this invasive species.

Current City Management Practices

The City's current management practices include the following:

- **Bylaws.** City bylaws have been implemented including banning the sale of rabbits in pet stores in 2010. Through the Public Parks and School Grounds Regulation (No. 8771), feeding of animals, including feral rabbits in any public park or school ground, and the depositing or release of animals in any public park or school ground is prohibited. As per the Animal Control Bylaw (No. 7932), homeowners are permitted to keep up to two (2) domestic rabbits per household. Staff are not currently contemplating additional bylaw changes for the management of domestic or feral rabbits.
- **City Animal Shelter and the BC SPCA.** The BC SPCA, which operates the City's animal shelter accepts domestic rabbits, but not feral rabbits. All domestic rabbits that are

put up for adoption at the City's animal shelter are sterilized prior to adoption to aid in controlling the rabbit population.

- **BC SPCA Public Education.** The BC SPCA has posted the following statement on the topic of feral rabbit management:

The BC SPCA is opposed to the abandonment of domestic rabbits into the wild, which is a criminal act under the Criminal Code of Canada and an offence under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. The BC SPCA strongly encourages municipalities to enact bylaws that prevent the sale or adoption of unsterilized rabbits and manage free-living domestic ("feral") rabbits.

The BC SPCA does not support the lethal control of free-living domestic ("feral") rabbits for nuisance reasons (including culls). When control is needed, the BC SPCA strongly encourages the use of non-lethal, non-contact, prevention and exclusion techniques. In addition, the BC SPCA supports activities that aim to humanely trap, sterilize and re-home adoptable rabbits in approved homes or sanctuaries that can provide for their needs for the remainder of their lives.

(Source: <https://spca.bc.ca/programs-services/leaders-in-our-field/position-statements/position-statement-on-feral-rabbits/>)

- **City of Richmond Public Awareness Campaign.** In the spring of 2022, the City engaged in a targeted Easter campaign, which is a popular time for individuals to purchase rabbits as gifts. Through conversations with rabbit advocacy groups and key stakeholders, it was recognized that there was a gap in the general knowledge regarding responsible ownership of pet rabbits. In order to combat this issue, the City's Easter Public Awareness Campaign focused on educating the public on the lifespan, commitment, care and cost of pet rabbits.

The campaign included updating the City's urban wildlife webpage and a social media campaign involving video and captioned photos of juvenile domestic rabbits with captions discussing the responsibilities of owning a pet rabbit and the suggested alternative of giving the gift of chocolate rabbits rather than a live pet. This seven-day campaign resulted in 9,659 impressions (number of people viewing the content) and 574 engagements (number of people interacting with the content).

- **Monitoring and Response.** At present, the City monitors and responds to complaints regarding feral rabbits on public property. When contacted by residents, City staff note the location and nature of the complaint and coordinate with Parks Operations staff to attend to the site to repair damage to parks infrastructure.

Residents are encouraged to contact Animal Protection Services if they observe someone feeding feral rabbits. Staff coordinate with Animal Protection Services, for animal control enforcement regarding feeding reports and installation of signage noting the prohibition in the City Bylaw on feeding at locations where this activity is regularly occurring.

Installed signage also includes educational information for residents and visitors of the City, of the unintended ecological effects of feeding urban wildlife.

Feral rabbits also impact School District No. 38 (Richmond) property. School District staff shared information chronicling extensive impacts to school property including burrowing under portable buildings, holes and feces on open lawn areas and adverse impacts to community garden plots.

If residents contact Parks staff regarding feral rabbits impacting private property, they receive information regarding management practices and contact information regarding local not-for-profit rabbit rescue organizations.

Feral Rabbit Management Study

Staff recently worked with the Invasive Species Council of British Columbia (ISCBC) to complete a Feral Rabbit Management Study. The findings and recommendations found in the study are data-driven and scientifically-based and provide unbiased recommendations for managing feral rabbits in Richmond. The project included conducting a field study to estimate feral rabbit activity on City-owned public land; a literature review of the impacts of feral rabbits; and identifying potential practices for the management of feral rabbits.

The field study was conducted at 24 locations where sightings of feral rabbits had been reported and where potential feral rabbit habitats had been identified. The 24 locations were observed twice (July and August, 2022), at which time 39 and 72 feral rabbits were observed respectively.

In addition, the evidence of significant impacts highlighted that the population indicates a high rate of reproduction and that they are widespread throughout the community. Whether it was the presence of feces (pellets), burrows, damaged plants or evidence of feeding, feral rabbits are already adversely impacting the environment. For example, based on feedback from Urban Bounty, 11 existing community gardens, including Cook and Terra Nova are seeing infestations and adverse impacts. Gardeners have taken on the added and unexpected cost of erecting hardware wire mesh fencing around individual plots to minimize damage.

The study recommends that an integrated and prompt management approach is required before management is no longer feasible due to the projected potential of a dramatic population increase. Based on the evidence and literature review, the study identified the following management options:

1. Policy and regulation changes: Create new or amend existing bylaws and regulations to reduce the likelihood of unwanted domestic rabbits being abandoned in City parks.
 - The City currently has the appropriate bylaws in place including regulations on feeding, dumping of animals in parks as well as a prohibition on selling rabbits.
2. Physical environment control: Establish physical controls such as fencing to exclude feral rabbits from key suitable habitats on public and private lands.
 - There are challenges with this approach due to Capital costs, on-going maintenance requirements and liability concerns.

3. Capture, sterilization and relocation: Widespread non-lethal capturing of feral rabbits whereupon they will be sterilized and re-homed to sanctuaries or approved homes.
 - Key to success for this approach is identifying a viable community partner with the appropriate expertise and long-term capacity.
4. Capture and humane euthanization: Widespread non-lethal capturing and subsequent humane disposal.
 - Due to public feedback, pursuing a euthanization management program is not recommended and should be considered only as a management practice of last resort after other approaches have been exhausted.
5. An integrated approach involving public education (Recommended): Recognizing that no one option will likely yield effective results, implementing an integrated approach including capture, sterilization and re-homing, as well as increased public awareness campaign.
 - The above is recommended as it is a holistic approach and is supported by past pilot project initiatives.

The study findings highlight that while preventing the introduction of an invasive species is a key initial step, the next most important action is early response before populations are well-established resulting in ongoing environmental and economic damage. An integrated approach involving the capture, sterilization and relocation of feral rabbits combined with an ongoing public education campaign is recommended before the population reaches a point where Richmond's environment, green spaces and agricultural sector further are adversely impacted.

Next Steps

Staff propose the following next steps:

Enhanced Public Awareness Campaign

Similar to the Public Awareness Campaign launched in 2022, the City will focus on increased rabbit education through social media leading up to, and throughout Easter. Once Easter has concluded, staff will continue the campaign and shift the messaging away from holiday focused material to general information targeted at behavior change and increased understanding of the responsibilities of rabbit ownership, as well as the role that feral rabbits play in Richmond's urban environment. This will also include collaboration with the ISCBC and their "Don't Let it Loose" education campaign focusing on the importance of keeping domestic animals out of BC's natural landscape.

Request for Proposals (RFP) for Feral Rabbit Management Services

Staff propose issuing an RFP following the City's existing purchasing practices to identify potential service providers who are willing to provide Feral Rabbit Management Services as outlined in Option Five of the Feral Rabbit Management Study:

To engage in the widespread non-lethal capturing of feral rabbits whereupon they will be sterilized and re-homed to sanctuaries or approved homes.

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Current feral rabbit management related activities are funded through the existing Wildlife Management budget. Should the RFP process identify a viable management strategy requiring additional funding beyond that which is available in the Wildlife Management budget, staff will submit a funding request for Council consideration.

Financial Impact

None.

Conclusion

Through continued public education campaigns, collaboration with the BC SPCA, and implementation of the non-lethal capture and sterilization of feral rabbits, the feral rabbit population in Richmond will remain manageable. Staff will continue to monitor incidents of feral rabbits impacting City infrastructure and bylaw infractions and recommend further action as required.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.K.' with a horizontal line underneath.

Alex Kurnicki
Manager, Parks Programs
(604-276-4099)

Att. 1: Information Bulletin Ministry of Forests, June 2022



INFORMATION BULLETIN

For Immediate Release
2022FOR0040-000994
June 23, 2022

Ministry of Forests

Changes to B.C.'s Wildlife Act will help control feral rabbits

VICTORIA – Regulatory changes have been made to the provincial Wildlife Act to help enhance government's ability to manage feral rabbits and reduce their spread.

Wild European and eastern cottontail rabbits are non-native and are known to destroy property (including agricultural crops) and are detrimental to native wildlife and their habitats.

Under changes to the Designation and Exemption Regulations in the Wildlife Act, European and eastern cottontail rabbits can no longer be relocated or released into the wild.

As well, a permit will no longer be required for trafficking, possessing or exporting European rabbits, captive or not. This removes permit requirements for municipalities or other groups to trap rabbits and transport them to rehab centres or homes, or euthanize them.

These regulatory changes will improve the ability to move feral non-native rabbits from one location to another and support options for having existing non-native rabbits removed. The amendments are a first step to improve the management of feral rabbits in order to reduce their spread and minimize their impact on the environment.

All species of the family Leporidae (hares and rabbits) are designated as wildlife under the Wildlife Act. This includes native species such as snowshoe hares, as well as non-native species such as the European rabbit and eastern cottontail. Both European rabbits and eastern cottontails are considered invasive, non-native pests and as such, are managed under the Designation and Exemption Regulation in the act.

Contact:

Ministry of Forests
Media Relations
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