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Report to the Rural Services and Wairarapa Committee
from Wayne O'Donnell, Manager, Biosecurity

Marsupial Management Co-Operative Research Centre – Funding

1. Purpose

To inform the Committee about the functions of the Marsupial Management Co-operative Research Centre and to seek the Committee's opinion on funding support.

2. Background

The Marsupial Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) is an Australian government research initiative. The CRC has been operating for five years and is about to apply for a second round of government funding to take effect in 2002 for a seven year term. Specific functions of the new CRC of relevance to NZ stakeholders, include –

- ◆ The development of biological control (fertility control) for possums
- ◆ The development of models to identify threshold possum density targets

The CRC provides an opportunity for stakeholders to participate in the setting of research priorities. In excess of A\$1M of Australian government / industry funds are available for in-kind possum research.

New Zealand resources supporting the current CRC include Landcare Research Ltd., Foundation of Research Science and Technology, and the Animal Health Board.

Progress with possum fertility control via immuno-contraception techniques are well advanced, with production of first-generation commercial products likely within the seven-year period.

3. Funding Proposal

In order to maximise the benefit of Australian federal funding support, the CRC has sought to expand inputs from New Zealand based stakeholders. Landcare Research Ltd, as a joint venture member of the CRC, has been instrumental in encouraging greater NZ participation. Options outlined include a joint venture arrangement or as a consortium member.

The National Possum Control Agencies (NPCA) has been suggested as a consortium vehicle, subject to receiving funding support from interested Regional Councils. To date, eight Councils have indicated financial support ranging from \$2,000 to \$15,000. The CRC are seeking \$50,000 from Councils with a further \$50,000 from the Department of Conservation and \$35-50,000 from the AHB. These funds would be sufficient to secure a Joint Venture membership enabling participation in operations and or management of the CRC. In general, Joint Venture members have estimated that their funding and expertise inputs have been leveraged from 10:1 to 30:1.

4. Issues

There are two main issues that the Committee needs to consider. Firstly, the Biosecurity Department has not any specific budgetary provision for funding the CRC in 2000/01. However, the Bovine Tb budget has historically been under budget and could be utilised.

Secondly, and more importantly, is the matter of publicly supporting an organisation that is involved in animal biocontrol. A number of questions need to be debated –

- ◆ Does Council believe it has an obligation to financially support animal biocontrol research or should this be the responsibility of the Crown or affected industry stakeholders?
- ◆ Who should be responsible for informing the public about the pro's and con's of possum biocontrol?
- ◆ Should Council simply purchase the 'product' when it becomes commercially available?
- ◆ Is there any real difference between biocontrol for plants and animals in terms of potential environmental effects? (Council currently invests \$27,000 annually in plant biocontrol)

The Committee should note that it has invested approximately \$1.8M annually of ratepayer funds towards possum control (Bovine Tb and RPMS) in recent years. The availability of an approved, publicly acceptable biocontrol agent could result in significant cost-savings.

The Crown, through the proposed DoC contribution and associated FORST funding, has already signalled its willingness to support possum biocontrol

research. FORST funds currently assist AgResearch Ltd to investigate other biocontrol option, including parasite, hormonal and lactation disruption.

5. Communications

No specific public communications are planned at present. However, should the Committee confirm support for funding the Marsupial CRC research programme, then it would be appropriate to prepare a media release summarising the reasoning behind the decision.

6. Recommendation

- (1) *That the Committee determines a position concerning the funding of the Marsupial CRC for possum biocontrol research.*
- (2) *Should the Committee agree to a financial contribution, then funds should be sourced from savings made in the 1999/2000 Bovine Tb budget. A maximum \$5,000 contribution would be appropriate.*

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