

FERAL DEER

A protected species or a pest?



Feral deer populations are rapidly growing and spreading across Victoria damaging the natural environment and causing havoc for farmers and motorists; how has it come to this?

Deer were introduced in the mid-1800's for game. For many decades the population remained relatively low but steadily growing and spreading. Later in the 20th century the population started to increase and spread rapidly; there are now over 1 million feral deer that occupy nearly 40% of Victoria.

Why are they called feral?

Deer are an introduced species that now exist in the wild in large numbers, and in an uncontrolled and unconstrained state, which means by definition they are appropriately described as feral deer. They have gone well beyond what might have once been thought of as wild game for hunters.

Why are feral deer a problem?

The impacts of feral deer on Victoria's environment, economy and community wellbeing are widespread and serious.

Feral deer degrade the natural environment

Victoria's precious biodiversity is impacted significantly and widely by feral deer. They cause substantial damage to native vegetation and ecologically fragile areas by overgrazing and trampling native grasslands and herb fields, and heavily browsing and ring-barking shrubs and trees.

They cause erosion by trampling and creating trails and degrade water quality by wallowing in wetlands and streams.

Sadly, feral deer have now invaded our finest natural areas, including almost all of Victoria's national parks from the coast to the high country, including Victoria's highest peak on Mount Bogong.

The impacts of feral deer can disrupt the overall viability and function of fragile ecosystems such as the alpine wetland, a delicate vegetation community listed as threatened under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) but being trashed by these heavy hard hoofed animals (scan QR code for video evidence).

Feral deer are accordingly listed as a key and potentially threatening process respectively in Australia's EPBC Act and *Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*.

Feral deer hinder native vegetation from recovery

As our environment struggles to deal with climate change and recover from serious disturbances such as bushfires, feral deer are hindering natural regeneration by browsing and grazing delicate regrowth and disturbing unstable recovering soils as their weight is distributed to the ground through small hard hooves.



Expensive and unsightly deer proof fences are being built around threatened species and vegetation communities to protect them from feral deer.



Landcare groups and landowners are having to invest more in expensive tree guards and fencing to protect their revegetation from feral deer.

Feral deer impact farmers and forestry

The high density of feral deer on and adjacent to farmlands is having a significant economic and psychological impact on farmers as many battle against feral deer. They cause damage to a wide variety of high value produce including vegetables, fruit and nut trees, cereal crops and vineyards, they foul pasture and water sources and compete with livestock for feed.

Feral deer are biologically similar to domesticated hoofed mammals so can carry and spread livestock diseases such as foot and mouth disease that can impact devastatingly on farm productivity and stock loss.



Many farmers are resorting to expensive fencing to protect high value crops such as orchards from feral deer damage.

Feral deer are a serious concern to foresters dealing with the impact on young pines in softwood plantations and regenerating native forests after logging.

Scan or click the QR code to access a video showing the alarming spread of deer, video evidence of deer damaging fragile ecosystems and deer roaming dangerously in traffic.

Feral deer are a public safety concern

As the population grows, feral deer are a high and increasing risk to motorists; the presence of feral deer in Victoria have resulted in a high number of crashes and accidents. People in areas where deer are present are anxious about driving at night.

What is the economic cost of feral deer?

Feral deer will cost Victoria more than \$2 billion over the next 30 years



Frontier Economics recently investigated the economic cost of feral deer to the Victorian community.

The report found the cost of doing nothing to control the feral

deer population in Victoria is estimated to be \$1.5bn to \$2.2bn over the next 30 years based on just 4 sectors:

- **Agriculture:** \$351m to \$350m due to lost grazing and resources spent managing feral deer.
- **Forestry:** \$269m to \$365m from lost forestry production.
- **Public safety:** \$576m to \$825m from deer-related vehicle accidents

- **Social:** \$308m to \$474m in social costs from reduced recreation and use values.

This does not include the cost to the environment or public health should disease be spread from feral deer to livestock or water supplies.

Scan or click the QR code to access Frontier Economics' report on feral deer.

Why are feral deer protected?

The impacts and challenges of feral deer are clear, so why aren't they treated as pest animals like foxes, rabbits and pigs? That is because they are still a protected species in Victoria's *Wildlife Act 1975*!

This is a hangover from when they were considered to require protection as game for the pleasure of hunters. The outdated protection is before Victoria had more than 1 million feral deer covering nearly half the state.

The population growth and spread has occurred under this regime of protection for game and is clearly hindering control and must change.

What actions does the Victoria State Government need to do to tackle the feral deer problem?

The *Wildlife Act* must be amended to remove the protected status of deer: why?

- Deer threaten the very habitat of many of the native wildlife species that the *Wildlife Act* is principally there to conserve and protect.
- There is confusion in the community; are they a pest or are they to be protected? This puts neighbours against neighbours where co-operative landscape scale control is needed.
- Removes the need for permits and conditions for control programs.
- Allows feral deer to be declared an established pest animal under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*, like foxes and rabbits, and stops putting the interests of hunters ahead of farmers, public safety and the environment.
- Opens the way for new tools to be developed to control feral deer populations.

The investment in control of feral deer must increase substantially

- Faced with an economic cost of more than \$2 billion over the next 30 years if nothing is done, the current \$4-5 million a year investment will simply be fighting a losing battle. The population will continue to grow and spread, conservatively at 15% per year based on current removal rates.
- There is an opportunity to start to stem the population spread and impact by preventing further spread and eliminating smaller and isolated populations while protecting valued assets. This needs investment to back up good planning.

If we act now, we can protect Victoria from feral deer so that future generations can enjoy the social and economic benefits of healthy national parks and landscapes.

Misconceptions about feral deer and hunting

#1 The position that if feral deer are not protected as game, hunters will no longer be able to shoot them on public land is false and misleading.

Declaring deer a pest animal will not affect the ability of recreational hunters to shoot deer, in fact it will deregulate the activity. Hunters can shoot pest animals in state forest and an MOU between SSAA and Parks Victoria provides for hunter assistance with control of pest species in parks and reserves. The alignment of hunters with properly planned deer control programs has been shown to be far more effective in reducing impacts than random recreational hunting. The economic contribution of hunting will not be affected by removing the protected status of deer as it will have little if any negative impact on hunters.

#2 Feral deer can simply be controlled by recreational hunters.

While hunters claim to remove a lot of feral deer as part of their recreation, this has had demonstrably little effect on stemming the population growth and spread nor the impacts. Professional and targeted culling programs have proven to be most effective in reducing impacts.



Foresters are resorting to expensive electric fencing to protect softwood plantations from feral deer.


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