**Poison trials raise hopes in feral pests fight**

[The World Today](http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/)

By Tom Nightingale

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[**Photo:** Poison trials targeting feral pests in outback areas (www.taiko.org.nz)](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-05-16/feral-cat-growls-in-the-bush/4015102)

[**Map:** Roxby Downs 5725](http://maps.google.com/?q=-30.5573,136.8922%28Roxby%20Downs%205725%29&z=5)

Feral cats, rabbits and foxes are causing problems across many parts of Australia, but there are hopes of new baiting methods soon.

In the arid area around Roxby Downs in the far north of South Australia, local organisation Arid Recovery is a non-profit group which runs a reserve where cats, foxes and rabbits are kept out with fencing.

When the sanctuary was created 15 years ago, the number of small mice and possums were about the same inside and outside its fences.

A survey back in February made clear the effects of creating the reserve and keeping it free of feral pests.

"During that trapping, we now catch six times more small mammals, so your little cute hopping mice and your plains rats and all those little natives ... inside the reserve than we do outside," said group member Hannah Spronk.

The group recently posted a photo of a dead feral cat on the internet to illustrate the damage just one animal can cause, as it shows the animal's stomach contents.

Hannah Spronk says the group is keen to highlight the harm feral cats can cause native wildlife.

"In one cat, it's got 24 painted dragons, three bearded dragons, three skinks, two earless dragons, a mouse and a zebra finch in there," she said.

"Cats have the same sort of digestive system as humans, so you know that anything you find in their stomach is something they have eaten in the last 24 hours is in there, so that one meal, one cat, and an estimated 15 million feral cats out there, so a big impact."

Foxes and rabbits are not prevalent in all areas of Australia, but feral cats are a problem from the Great Dividing Range in eastern Australia to the deserts further west.

**Targeting poison**

In the Roxby Downs area, the local council tries to tackle the issue with some of the toughest cat by-laws in Australia.

Residents must keep their cat on their own property and it must be desexed and microchipped.

Tony Buckmaster from the Invasive Animals Co-operative Research Centre said a potential bait solution was being tested.

[**Audio:** Feral cats feast after outback rains (The World Today)](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-05-16/feral-cats-feast-after-outback-rains/4015004)

"It's a piece of conduit that stands about 50 centimetres high and it has a number of sensors in it," he explained.

"If the correct number of sensors is broken it will then spray a short spray of PAP (poison) onto the fur of the animal so if it breaks the low sensor no PAP is released because that would be mainly a native animal, they're relatively low to the ground - a taller animal again would not trigger the PAP to come out."

The research centre is partnering Ecological Horizons to spray the poisonous paste onto the side of cats, but not onto other animals.

"Because cats groom themselves, the cat would then take the PAP into its system when it licks itself," Dr Buckmaster explained.

At the moment feral cats are managed mainly by trapping or shooting, both methods labour-intensive and suited to small areas.

Dr Buckmaster says two projects in Western Australia are testing potential bait solutions.

One involves an aerial bait drop, but it can only happen in northern Australia where native animals are naturally resistant to the toxin.

The other has poison inside a hard tablet, with the theory being native animals will gnaw the tablet but spit it out, thinking it is a stone.

"With the foxes and cats, they eat quite differently, their dentition isn't suited for gnawing or for great amounts of chewing so they'll take one or two bites and then swallow the bait whole, and the capsule will then release in the stomach and the toxin will go through their system," Dr Buckmaster explained.

There are hopes an application can be made to the Australian Pesticides and Medicines Authority so the poison can be made widely available.