



Department of
Primary Industries and
Regional Development

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Frequently Asked Questions

Feral deer control



Introduction

Deer are declared pests in Western Australia (WA) under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007* (BAM Act) and associated *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Regulations 2013* (Regulations).

Land managers are legally required to control declared pests on their properties in WA. However, there are limited control methods available for managing feral deer. By targeting deer at selected sites, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) aims to test, refine and develop tools tailored that suit WA conditions.

Three species of deer are present in feral populations in WA, red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), fallow deer (*Dama dama*) and rusa deer (*Rusa timorensis*).

Under the Regulations, red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and fallow deer (*Dama dama*) can be kept as stock, but all other deer species are prohibited from keeping. This includes rusa deer (*Rusa timorensis*) which are also present on state managed lands in small numbers.

Due to deer being an introduced species primarily for farming, it is considered that Feral deer occur in WA primarily because of escape from deer farms and or deliberate release by owners following the decline of deer industry in the 1990's. The following FAQs provide information regarding aerial feral deer control in the Shires of Chittering, Harvey and Esperance which will take place in August 2025.

Why are you culling feral deer?

Feral deer are becoming one of Australia's worst vertebrate pests, with their populations rapidly increasing across Australia.

Feral deer:

- **damage native plants and crops**, impacting ecosystems and reducing biodiversity
- **foul waterways and wetlands** by wallowing leading to degraded water quality
- **compete with livestock and native fauna** for food putting pressure on agricultural and native species
- **cause motor vehicle accidents** endangering human lives and causing property damage
- **are likely to spread dieback** (*Phytophthora*), a soil borne pathogen that threatens plant health across a wide range of species.

The national feral deer population has surged from approximately 50,000 in 1980, to an estimated 1–2 million in 2022. This considerable growth has led to significant production losses in primary industries, amounting to an estimated \$69 million (ABARES 2021 data) in damages, particularly in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

Feral deer populations can increase in size by 35% every year. To effectively stop this rapid growth, the number of feral deer removed must exceed the rate of population increase. Aerial culling is currently the most cost-effective control tool for quickly reducing population size in rural areas.

There is an opportunity in WA to target several known populations of feral deer to reduce numbers to manageable levels, using contemporary and innovative techniques that will be refined to suit WA conditions.

What is thermally-assisted aerial control?

Aerial shooting is widely used in Australia to control large feral animals such as pigs, deer, buffalo, horses and other pest species. Typically, this involves a helicopter pilot and a professional marksman.

Thermally-assisted aerial control includes an additional person who operates a thermal camera to detect large feral animals that would normally go unnoticed under the cover of dense foliage. This method is highly effective, particularly in low-density populations and is the preferable control option to eradicate feral deer.

Thermal technology allows for greater precision and efficiency, ensuring more successful control outcomes.

Why are you using aerial control instead of ground culling?

Feral deer are a 'cryptic' species that hide in dense scrub and forest for protection from predators. Movement is difficult in these areas due to dense foliage. Difficulty in accessing these areas, coupled with the need to rapidly reduce the feral deer population by at least 35% just to keep the population from increasing, means that ground culling is not a practical or cost-effective method.

Aerial control conducted by trained and experienced aerial shooting teams, in accordance with National Standard Operating Procedures and Codes of Practice, can deliver highly effective control, while maintaining high animal welfare standards.

Why don't you open Crown land for recreational hunters to control feral deer?

Feral deer densities and distribution across much of Australia are increasing, and well-established recreational hunting programs have not contained feral deer or reduced feral deer population growth. Recreational hunting as a component of ground culling removes some feral deer. However, it has been shown to have little impact on reducing population growth.

Please see the response to the previous question for additional information.

Does thermally-assisted aerial control pose a safety risk to people, livestock, or pets?

No, landowners are always notified well in advance of plans to cull feral deer on their property. Our team consists of highly experienced pilots, spotters and marksmen who are trained professionals. They regularly fly in agricultural areas and take great care to minimise disturbance to livestock and pets.

The pilot ensures the helicopter is well-positioned to accurately identify the target animal, often within 30 metres. The shooter and spotter must agree on the identity of the feral animal before a shot is taken, ensuring precision and safety throughout the operation.

What will happen to the feral deer carcasses?

When large feral animals such as pigs and deer are culled, the carcasses are typically left in place to undergo natural decomposition. Generally, carcass collection is not required,

and feral animal control often takes place in densely forested Crown land and on large regional properties where retrieving carcasses is not cost-effective or logistically feasible.

Most of the control efforts will take place on inaccessible state-managed land, making carcass removal impossible.

Where will the helicopter operate?

Between 2023 and 2024, DPIRD conducted two rounds of aerial thermal surveys and deployed camera traps in the Shires of Chittering, Harvey and Esperance to estimate the number of feral deer in these regions. Thermally assisted aerial shooting will take place over Crown land and over a small number of private rural properties.

What steps will be taken to avoid stressing my livestock?

Our pilots are very experienced at performing aerial surveys in agricultural areas and will avoid livestock that react to the aircraft. Affected landholders have been contacted during two aerial surveys in 2023 and 2024 to address any concerns and to note paddocks and areas to be avoided.

We are currently discussing the control operation with affected landholders and will complete this work well before the operation commences in July and August 2025.

How often will the helicopter fly over my property?

The helicopter will only operate over properties that are part of the control program. The helicopter flies in a grid pattern throughout the designated control area, which means that on larger properties it may pass over multiple times.

The helicopter will focus on areas where deer are frequently found, returning to these locations as needed. Other areas may only be flown over once, depending on the distribution of feral deer population.

What time will the helicopter fly over my property?

During the control operation, the helicopter generally flies between the hours of 5:00 AM to 7:00 PM. Depending on temperature and weather conditions, the helicopter may not operate throughout the entire day. In hot weather, their flight window will be early morning or early evening, so the thermal cameras can detect the heat of the animals. No control work is conducted overnight.

What happens if the weather is unsuitable for flying?

If weather conditions are unsuitable, the aircraft will be grounded, and work will be rescheduled. DPIRD follows strict safety protocols when conducting any helicopter operations, including adhering to weather safety guidelines.

Landowners who have emailed aerialwork@dpiird.wa.gov.au to request updates and provided a mobile phone number will receive text notifications regarding any significant delays or updated schedules.

What will happen after the control program?

The feral deer control program in the Shires of Chittering, Harvey and Esperance is scheduled to run until August 2027, with aerial control activities and associated landowner consultations repeating once a year in the winter months during this time period.

If additional operations are required after this date, then all affected landholders will be consulted accordingly.

How do I report pests on my property?

If you see vertebrate pests such as feral deer or feral pigs on your property, you can report these sightings to FeralScan, using the App or www.feralscan.org.au. This records their locations across Australia. Control information can also be found at www.pestsmart.org.au

Where can I find more information?

For more information about feral deer, visit dpird.wa.gov.au and search for 'feral deer'. You can also email feraldeer@dpird.wa.gov.au.

National feral deer statistics

- Six species of feral deer have become widespread in Australia.
- Deer numbers in Australia are estimated at between 1 and 2 million.
- Feral deer cost the Australian economy about \$91.3 million in 2021, including:
 - \$69.1 in agricultural losses
 - \$17.8 million in public expenditure for control efforts
 - \$3.3 million in motor vehicle impacts
 - \$1.2 million in train collisions.

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