

Vertebrate Pest Management Program

Deer control – Round 2 update

The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) completed Round 2 of aerial control operations in Harvey and Esperance in June 2026 delivering significant reductions in populations of both rusa and red deer in these regions.

Background

In Western Australia, Deer are declared pests under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007* and associated regulations.

Land managers are legally required to control declared pests including feral deer. Currently, there are few effective control methods available for feral deer. DPIRD aims to develop and refine control tools suited to WA conditions by targeting feral deer at selected sites.

Deer populations in WA

WA has three species of feral deer; fallow, red and rusa. Rusa deer are classified as a Category 1 declared pest and are found only in the Harvey region, for these reasons they are subject to eradication.

Feral deer were introduced to WA through deliberate release or escapees from deer farms. WA's current populations are closely tied to former deer farm locations, though many have spread considerably.

Impacts of deer

Feral deer pose a threat to agricultural productivity, biodiversity and public safety. They are a significant pest in Australia, with an estimated national population between 1 to 2 million. Feral deer cost the economy approximately \$91.3 million annually through agricultural damage, control efforts, vehicle collisions, and train impacts (Centre for Invasive Species Solutions).

While deer numbers in WA are still relatively low, this presents a valuable opportunity for early intervention before populations expand to the levels seen in eastern Australia, mitigating potential impacts on agriculture.

Environmental outcomes remain central to this work. Reduced deer densities help safeguard native

ecosystems by preventing habitat degradation and reducing pressure on native fauna. In parallel, the work strengthens biosecurity by minimising the risk of disease transmission and the spread of agricultural pests.

Feral deer populations can grow by 35% annually, proactive control is essential. To stop population growth, feral deer removal must exceed the rate of population increase.

Aerial culling is currently the most cost-effective control tool to achieve population reduction.



Thermal assisted aerial culling

Thermal Assisted Aerial Control (TAAC) is an advanced control method that builds on traditional aerial culling techniques.

TAAC involves the use of high-resolution, manually operated thermal imaging technology from the helicopter, enabling the precise detection and targeting of animals in dense vegetation.

This control was performed by a highly trained and experienced team, including a professional pilot, a thermal camera operator and nationally accredited aerial marksmen, ensuring accuracy and safety throughout the deployment.

Key benefits of TAAC include:

- Improved identification and targeting of animals, even from a distance.
- Enhanced ability to track animals through dense scrubland and forested areas.
- Easier reacquisition of scattered herds.
- Accurate identification of non-target species.
- Comprehensive data capturing.

Program area

The program operational areas includes multiple land tenures, covering small / peri urban and large agricultural holdings, local and state government managed properties. The program activities are closely monitored by ground crews using live mapping to ensure compliance with all operational and safety requirements.

Community engagement

Community engagement is a key focus for the program working closely with landholders, land managers, local shires, biosecurity groups and government agencies to provide information, build relationships and support a coordinated approach to the management of feral deer.

Landholders were provided with information and support in the leadup to control operations via community information sessions, newspaper adverts, regular phone calls, social media posts and text messages before and after control. Post-control surveys and stakeholder feedback showed that participants felt well informed, supported and confident with the program.

Animal welfare

A primary objective of the program was for DPIRD to deliver the operation to the highest animal welfare standards DPIRD's feral animal control procedures are specifically designed to align with National Guidelines, placing animal welfare at the forefront of all activities.



Deer monitoring and sampling

As part of control program, DPIRD scientists sampled deer to obtain important biological information. Data on reproductive traits, demographic structure, and genetic profiles were collected to provide knowledge of feral deer biology and guide future management and control efforts.

Preliminary findings demonstrated a strong female bias in the sampled population, with females accounting to 63% of all sampled animals, compared to 65% in the previous year. 51% of these females showed signs of having reproduced within the past six months, consistent with last year's findings. However, a lower pregnancy rate was observed.

These findings are expected to support the development of more targeted control strategies and enhanced monitoring programs.

Program summary

Round 1 was held in winter 2025, with 524 deer culled within the Esperance and Harvey regions. The decline in numbers culled in 2026 is consistent with population reductions, with removals exceeding the annual reproduction rate of 35% in both rounds, demonstrating effectiveness of the program.

Round 2 was conducted between 2nd June to 19th June, the key outcomes were:

- 274 deer were humanely culled.
- No wounded animals escaped.
- Majority of feral deer were in dense scrub and bushland, with TAAC significantly improving detection.
- 85% of animals in Esperance and 100% in Harvey were dispatched from state managed lands.
- Post-cull monitoring is currently underway.

The Esperance program, conducted over a two year period is now complete. The purpose of the operation was:

- To trial the efficacy and suitability of TAAC in WA conditions, proven to be highly effective.
- Upskill DPIRD staff capacity in the use of TAAC.
- Reduce an isolated population of red deer.

The success of the Esperance operation would not have been possible without the use of TAAC.

Having demonstrated it's effectiveness, TAAC will continue to be used by DPIRD as they progress plans to eradicate to rusa deer from Harvey. The program will be ongoing for several years and will also include on ground control and remote camera monitoring.

How can you help?

Report deer sightings through FeralScan, download the app or go to feralscan.org.au

feralSCAN 



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