

Submission
No 120

**INQUIRY INTO PROPOSED AERIAL SHOOTING OF
BRUMBIES IN KOSCIUSZKO NATIONAL PARK**

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Proposed Aerial Shooting of Feral Horses in Kosciuszko National Park

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this inquiry into aerial shooting of feral horses.

When considering the merits of aerial shooting of animals, the merits must be weighed up against the options, with consideration of the whole situation. NO method is guaranteed perfect for culling an animal, but the life of a normally domestic animal, unowned in the wild is much less perfect. Aerial culling has high animal welfare outcome in comparison to other suggested methods, and is practical, a major consideration. For aerial shooting of feral horses (HOR002) all government authorities are required to follow the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to ensure safety of operators as well as the humane killing of the horses ¹.

It is no accident that aerial shooting is the favoured method of controlling the number of feral animals in NSW, with nearly 90% of removals by that method. It works, is relatively efficient and relatively humane. The anomaly is for feral horses in national parks in NSW, due to a political decision, not based on merit. In fact, the official English report of the issue that resulted in this anomaly found that aerial shooting should be used². Since then, there has been a lot of hyperventilation by anti-environmentalists to claim that aerial shooting is cruel. Properly carried out in accordance with the protocols, it can be the most welfare-favourable method of removing feral animals.

Aerial shooting of feral horses is allowable in all other states and territories in Australia, and in NSW outside national parks.

This committee must consider the outcomes of different rates of population growth on the number of horses that must be removed each year, and the cost implications. These facts provide a salutary illustration of why politicians need to be very careful in dictating scientific policy. You no doubt will have been provided with a number of pre-brumby supporter 'counts' and 'claims' of less than 1,000 horses in northern KNP where 85% of the horses are found. They have no credibility and have damaged the credibility of all those who claim they are realistic.

Had proper management and culling of the horses taken place in 2003 when numbers were reduced after the big fires through KNP,

- or even in 2014 when environmentalists really began calling in earnest for proper management,
- or had the 2016 draft Kosciuszko Wild Horse Plan of Management been enacted,
- or there had not been delays caused by Mr Barilaro's obfuscation including calling for another survey then ignoring it and then delaying finalisation of a new Management Plan until 2021 under his Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018,

the current disaster could have been far less traumatic for all. No-one is happy that so many animals must be removed. All alternate options have failed, are unrealistic such as fertility control for a wild population over a vast area, or are not acceptable, such as brumby running.

¹ Sharp, T. (2011). Aerial shooting of Feral Horses. Standard Operating Procedure. Available from: <https://pestsmart.org.au/toolkit-resource/aerial-shooting-of-feral-horses/>

² <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/pestsweeds/englishReportFinal.pdf>

Mr Barilaro and his supporters are responsible for tens of thousands more horses having to be culled than if he had allowed proper management to take place a decade ago. I for one am angry that this obstruction has led to this situation.

Aerial or helicopter shooting is the only viable option to cope with this politician made debacle. Fortunately, it is a much better option for animal welfare than the options that have been used up till now, and much better than letting horses starve from overpopulation.

The number of horses in KNP will be higher than the 2022 survey estimate of 18,814³, as only 2,200 horses had been removed in the 21 months to October 2023⁴, whereas the indicative natural increase was around 16%/year, so since the November 2022 survey estimate of 18,814 to now, the natural increase less the number removed since that survey will be at least 20,000.

If we assume 20,000 horses at 1 July 2023, then to achieve the legal requirement of 3,000 horses in KNP by 30 June 2027_

- at a 15% annual increase, about 7,000 horses/year have to be removed.
- at a 20% annual increase, over 7,500 horses/year have to be removed.

It is obvious that this is an immense number. At least 26,000 horses must be removed in less than four years. The only way it can be achieved is by using every efficient method possible. That includes aerial shooting, ground shooting, and if resources permit, trapping for rehoming.

The committee would be wise to take the advice of professional statisticians to consider the quantum of the task. Already more horses have been removed from northern KNP than were 'counted' or claimed to be in northern KNP by a number of brumby advocates. The mischief of the demands for recounts must be seen for what they are: attempts to stop management of feral horses in KNP. The management of KNP is too important to be dictated by this behaviour.

COSTS

A 2019 study (Beeton and Johnson 2019) suggested that the cost of culling of horses from a helicopter varied from \$85-\$414 depending on density.⁵ If we accept a 15% annual increase scenario where 28 000 horses need to be removed, the cost in 2019 figures will be between \$2.4m and \$11.6m. Other removal methods are much more expensive. The cost factor is one that has not been raised in the debate but must be a consideration.

Up to 2016, the cost of the Kosciuszko trapping programme was \$1116/horse totalling \$3.3M to trap and remove 3183 horses over the period 2002/3 to 2015/16 (OEH 2016)⁶. That was

³ <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Animals-and-plants/Pests-and-weeds/Kosciuszko-wild-horses/kosciuszko-national-park-wild-horse-population-survey-2022.pdf>

⁴ Senate Inquiry into the Impacts and Management of feral horses in the Australian Alps. Atticus Flemming, Acting Coordinator-General, Environment and Heritage Group, Department of Planning and Environment, New South Wales

⁵ Beeton, N. & Johnson, C. (2019), Modelling horse management in the Australian Alps, *Special Issue: Feral horses in the Australian Alps*, 20(1))

⁶ OEH (2022) Evaluation of the implementation of the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan (2021) found at <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Animals-and-plants/Pests-and-weeds/Kosciuszko-wild-horses/kosciuszko-national-park-wild-horse-heritage-plan-2021-evaluation-report.pdf>

only for the horses that were close to trucking access. Assuming that cost is now at least \$1500 per horse, and they are all easily trapped and trucked, with no sabotage as has happened in the past, the trapping option for 28,000 horses under the 15% growth rate scenario (4 years at 7000/yr) would be at least \$42m.

Is the government willing to spend all that extra money for an option that is more stressful to the horses?

As a minimum, it would be sensible to aim at removing at least 10-15 thousand horses in each of the next two years to lessen the total number over the four-year period.

For public safety and to limit disruption by those opposing culling of horses, it's obvious that when operations are undertaken in an area, it will need to be securely closed to the public. The sooner that occurs, the less disruption there will be to public use of the various areas on KNP. Longer-term, coordination of aerial culling of all target animals makes sense.

For comparison, when density is lowered as with the Kiamanawa horses in New Zealand, since numbers were reduced from thousand to 300 be reduced to annually, the annual rate of increase over the last decade is around 27%, outstripping the ability of rehomers to cope with the numbers after 10 years of trying this method. Lower density and good years for grass growth could see a similar increase in the breeding rate in KNP, so this needs to be considered in attempts to control the feral horse numbers.

Anyone considering the welfare of feral horses in KNP needs to consider not just the environmental damage and the effect they have on native flora, fauna and ecosystems, but also the effects of overpopulation on the horses themselves. KNP isn't a horse ranch, it isn't a horse safari park, it isn't a farm or a paddock and the horses are not a managed herd where breeding is controlled. KNP is a national park. Horses rightly belong where they can be properly maintained and not be subjected to overpopulation that also dispossesses the native animals, or to starvation. It happened before when there was lower density of horses than at present. We have forecasts of a new drought.

It's time to support management of all feral animals based on facts, not emotional fiction. Not addressing issues of invasive species costs dearly. The spread of the red fire ants from a small base is about to become a nation-wide catastrophe. Governments have a habit of burying their heads in the sand.

Please recommend that urgent action to control feral horses, whether you want to call them brumbies, wild living horses, or Paleface, Poster Boy or Blaze or any other personal name, by recommending the most humane method of controlling them, aerial shooting.

Thank you for your attention to my submission.