

**Presentation to *Legislative Council's
Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in
Victoria,***

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Introduction

Yesterday Dr Kylie Cairns: highlighted the now substantial body of ecological research which shows the dingo, as apex predator, to be an important native keystone species.

The current Victorian government has been repeatedly approached by environmental experts to improve apex predator protection.

Australian governments are slow to recognize this ecological reality, resulting in the continued persecution of Victoria's native apex predator as an *'invasive pest'*.

The policy distinction between dingoes and 'wild dogs' in current policy is false; an environmentally irresponsible fiction that has been repeated so often, and over such a long period of time, that it has come to be accepted as fact.

Introduction

The net effect of 'wild dog' rhetoric has been to *define the dingo out of existence* as an indigenous taxon. Without ecological or taxonomic justification, the dingo is discursively reconstituted as an 'invasive exotic pest', allegedly threatening both agriculture and Victorian ecosystems.

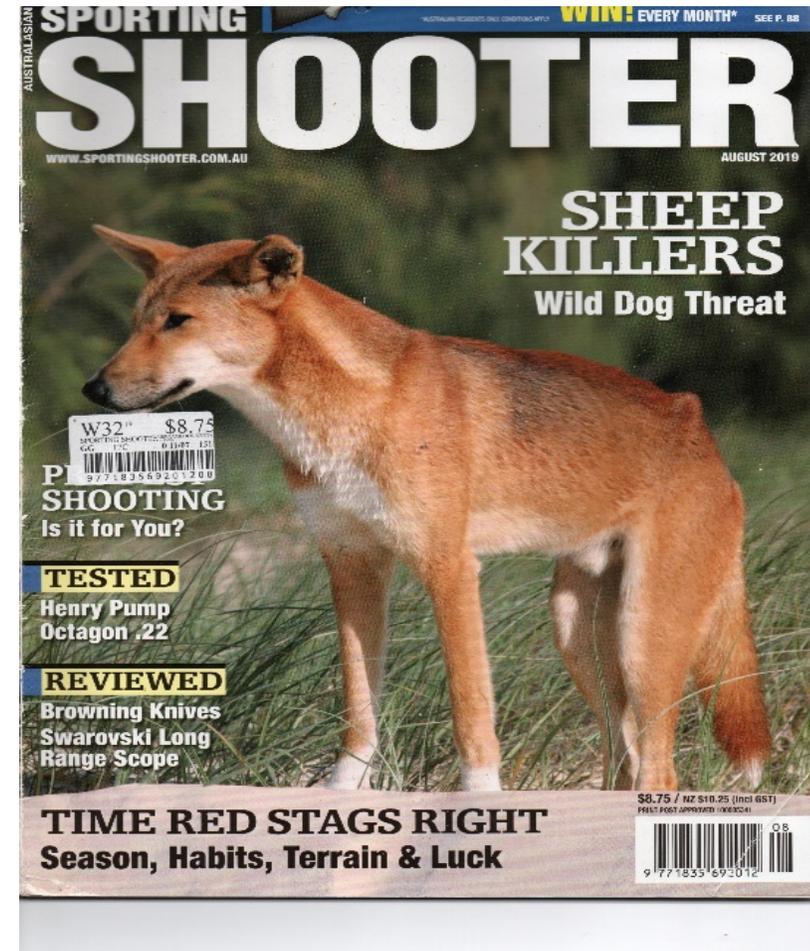
In practice, the dingo receives no more protection today than it did prior to its listing under the FFG Act.

The dingo is still officially *unprotected* in those areas of Crown land which were most lethally controlled prior to the threatened species listing. (3 kilometer buffer)

Indeed, since the dingo was listed, lethal control has intensified through the introduction of aerial baiting and a wild dog bounty. In Victoria, a threatened native taxon has a bounty on its head.

Introduction

Recreational hunters can still hunt dingoes with virtual immunity including those parts of public land where the dingo is notionally 'protected', where even government controllers are not permitted to operate.



Focus:

- **Cultural and institutional barriers blocking policy reform on dingo governance**
- **Evidence which challenges the myth that dingoes and 'wild dogs' present a significant threat to farm stock.**
- **The excessive degree of lethal control deployed and,**
- **Key areas of necessary reform to dingo governance**

The historical, social and economic drivers of excessive lethal control of the dingo

Historical legacy

The anti-dingo mindset took hold as European colonisers rapidly and aggressively transformed an unfamiliar Australian environment for sheep grazing.

Anything that stood in the way of this process was deemed expendable, often by lethal means. Dingoes were demonised.

It is still common to hear demonising and exaggerated claims of dingo predation on farm stock.

... wild dogs are taking over Victoria's high country and cutting a bloody swathe through native animals and livestock. (NP Media Release 2010)

Rearguard mind set of Victorian agriculture bureaucracy

The inherited discourse which demonises dingoes as 'wild dogs' is routinely lent *institutional* endorsement from sections of the Victorian government bureaucracy.

In many ways, *Agriculture Victoria* continues to legitimise this essentially 19th Century mind set.

The Victorian agriculture bureaucracy, enforces the ecologically false dingo - 'wild dog' distinction - asserts that 'wild dogs' kill and maim farm livestock, force farmers to direct resources to less productive activities and impact on human health. The escalation of lethal control is its primary policy and practical response.

This intransigence of the Victorian agriculture bureaucracy to the ecological merits of apex predator conservation is currently a significant barrier to whole of government policy development.

The influence of big business lethal control agenda

There is now a convergence of inherited historical prejudices and the fact that killing dingoes ('wild dogs') has become big business – a multi-million dollar per year enterprise.

There is now a number of linked private sector business entities that comprise a lethal control industry, including well funded industry representative organisations, poison manufacturers and distributors, and lobbyist organisations.

These organisations have a strong vested interest in promoting the continued use and escalation of lethal control (poisons) by governments and landholders – regardless of stock loss levels.

Poison industry influence within government agencies

The influence of private-sector lethal control advocates upon Victorian government departments and policy making on how the dingo is defined and how alleged 'wild dogs' are managed is disproportionate and disturbing.

The most influential private sector document in this regard is the National Wild Dog Action Plan.

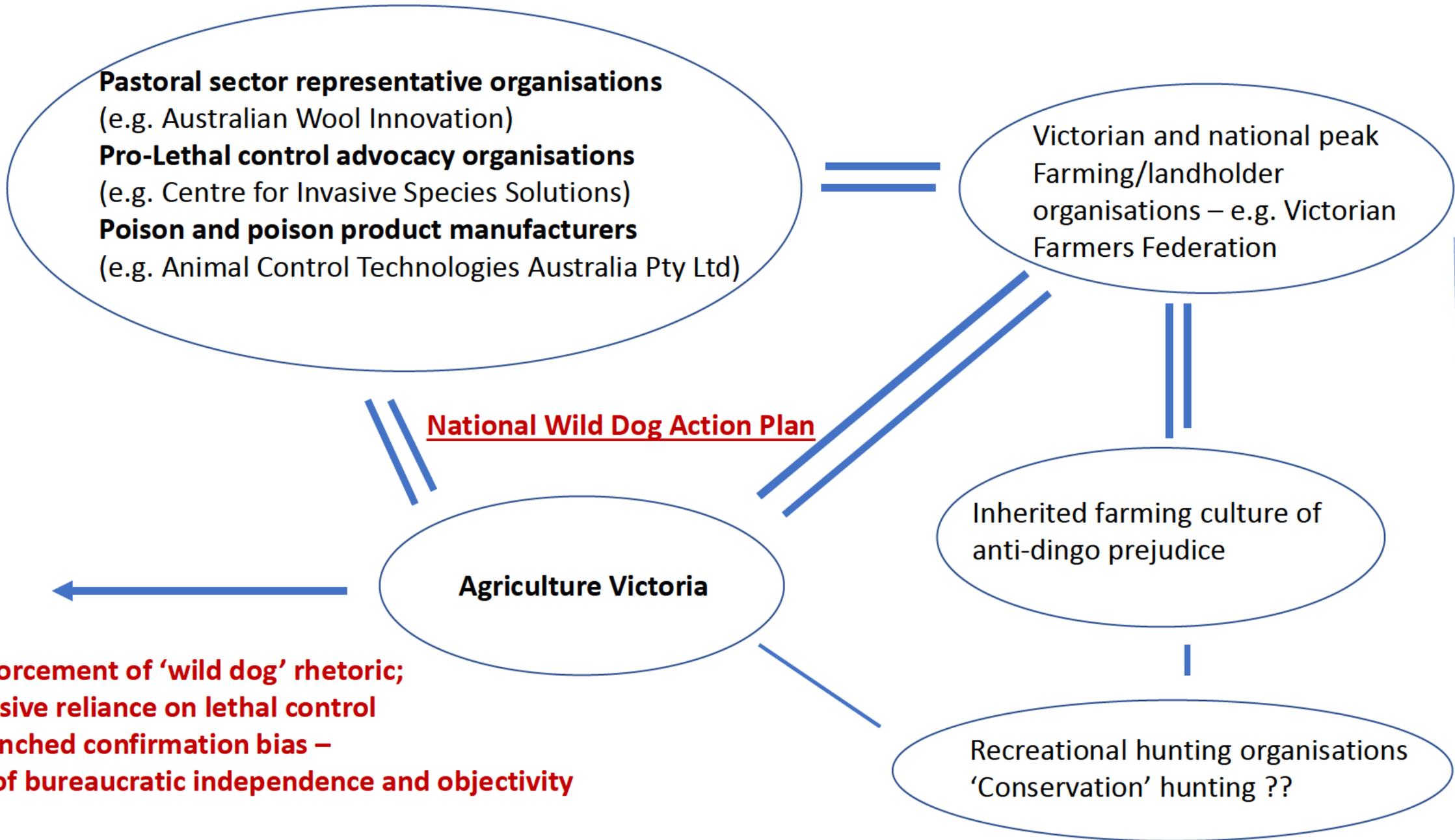
The Plan's definition of 'wild dog' unashamedly includes dingoes and their hybrids.

Yet, Agriculture Victoria's own 'wild dog' management plan largely reflects the policy prescriptions of the private sector National Wild Dog Action Plan.

Poison industry influence within government agencies

Victorian policy states:

“The approach in Victoria must be consistent with national and state policy documents... National policy documents include... the National Wild Dog Action Plan...” (Vic Gov., Action Plan for Managing wild Dogs in Victoria, 2014 - 2019, 2013) (Emphasis added)

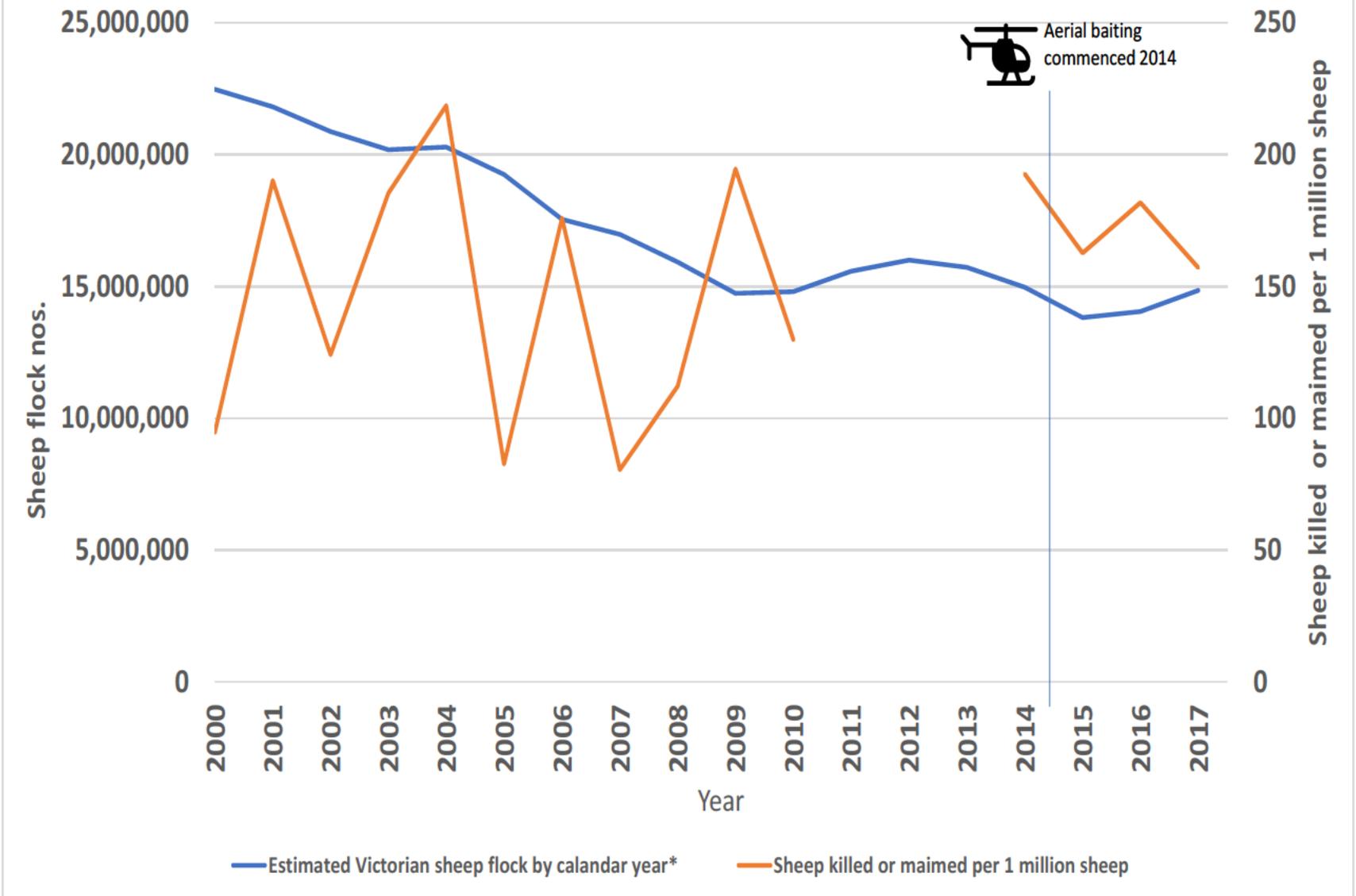


Stock predation rates – Using FOI, What does government data show us?

Livestock loss *rates* - losses relative to Victorian sheep flock size, are essential to evaluating the case for lethal control.

Agriculture Victoria online and other information does not give stock predation rates.

Victorian sheep flock numbers (left axis) and numbers of sheep reported killed or maimed (confirmed and unconfirmed) from 'wild dog' predation per one million of sheep flock (right axis), 2000 to 2017, Victoria



Stock predation rates – What does government data show us?

Significantly, the data indicate that the introduction of aerial baiting in 2014 did not have a significant impact on stock loss numbers, which were within the range of 3,207 and 2,247 between 2014 and 2017; that is between 193 and 157 in every one million sheep in Victoria.

Stock predation rates – What does government data show us?

Numbers of sheep reported killed or maimed, and sheep killed or maimed per 1 million sheep by calendar year, 2000-2017, Victoria		
Calendar year	Sheep killed or maimed (No.)	Sheep killed or maimed per million
2000	2129	95
2001	4147	190
2002	2589	124
2003	3741	185
2004	4431	219
2005	1589	83
2006	3085	176
2007	1366	80
2008	1785	112
2009	2866	195
2010	1922	130
2011	*	*
2012	*	*
2013	*	*
2014	3207	193
2015	2247	163
2016	2553	182
2017	2332	157
Sources: Derived from - ABS, Agricultural Commodities Australia, selected years.		
DELWP: PAIS, Dogbytes access, Dogbytes mobile and MAX data sets		
* Data unreliable		

Opportunity cost argument

Wild dog control advocates argue: because of the predation threat to farm stock near to public land, farmers are forced to underutilise land to its full potential (give up on sheep farming), thus incurring an 'opportunity cost'.

This is most commonly claimed to be 13 to 18 million dollars per year.

This claim is weak on ethical grounds:

- In all modern societies, competing vested interests (personal and corporate) are often constrained relative to one another through legislative, regulatory and customary restraints, for the common good
- In this case, the calculation of opportunity cost at the expense of responsible environmental management is unacceptable.
- Why should any group feel it is legitimate to claim a cost from being prevented from destroying the natural world – even if they have gotten away with in the past?

Conclusion: the scale and intensity of 'wild dog' lethal control bears no relation to the size of the problem - Unrealistic landholder expectations

Zero tolerance mind set

A widely held view within sections of the farming community is that any stock loss from predation, whatsoever, is unacceptable and that large amounts of public money should be routinely spent in an attempt to eliminate what is - in reality, a very marginal issue.

It is doubtful that zero stock losses could be met in practice. Given the environmental damage incurred from apex predator destruction, this expectation is ethically indefensible.

Escalating lethal dingo ('wild dog') control

**driven by a commercial and ideological dynamic
detached from any practical purpose**

**\$\$\$ to be made and public and private sector careers
perpetuated**

**Strong bonds of collegiality between lethal control
professionals across the public and private sectors;
functioning as a self-conscious class**

Ground baiting

Selected 'wild dog' program data, Victoria, 2015-2016, 2016-2017 and 2018-2019

	Fulltime 'Wild Dog' Controllers	Trap night capacity	DEWLP Targetted Ground Baiting		Community 'Wild Dog' Control Targets - private land
			Transects to be baited (km)	Est. No. Baits at 10 per kilometer	Baits to be laid in forthcoming period
2015-2016	19	57,750	2,271	22,710	33,450
2016-2017	19	57,750	2,131	21,310	37,584
2018-2019	18	57,000	1,965	19,650	8,555
Source: DELWP, selected wild dog program reports					
Trap nights is the number of traps set by the number of nights deployed.					

Community baiting programs – ground baiting on private land

These programs:

- **Promoted by the Victorian pest management bureaucracy as a means of building positive public relations with farming communities**
- **Followed a period when these relations were very poor. Community baiting is a public relations exercise on the part of Agriculture Victoria.**
- **Promoted as a vehicle for ‘community building’ amongst rural populations**

Problematic because:

- **Public relations and community building rationales can operate independently of, or become disassociated from, any concrete need for stock protection from dingo predation – they can take on a life of their own.**

Aerial baiting - introduced in 2014

Aerial baiting, kilometers baited and baits deployed, 2014 to May 2020		
	Klm baited	Baits deployed
2014 Autumn	428.2	4,005
2014 Spring	429.2	3,982
2015 Spring	429.8	3,975
2016 Spring	430.0	3,984
2017 Autumn	425.2	3,932
2017 Spring	425.2	3,932
2018 Autumn	429.8	3,988
2018 Spring	429.8	3,981
2019 Autumn	429.8	4,126
2019 Spring	429.8	3,978
2020 Autumn	429.8	3,981
Total		43,864

Source: DELWP, Aerial Baiting Operation Reports, 2014 to 2020

**Deployed in
inaccessible areas'**

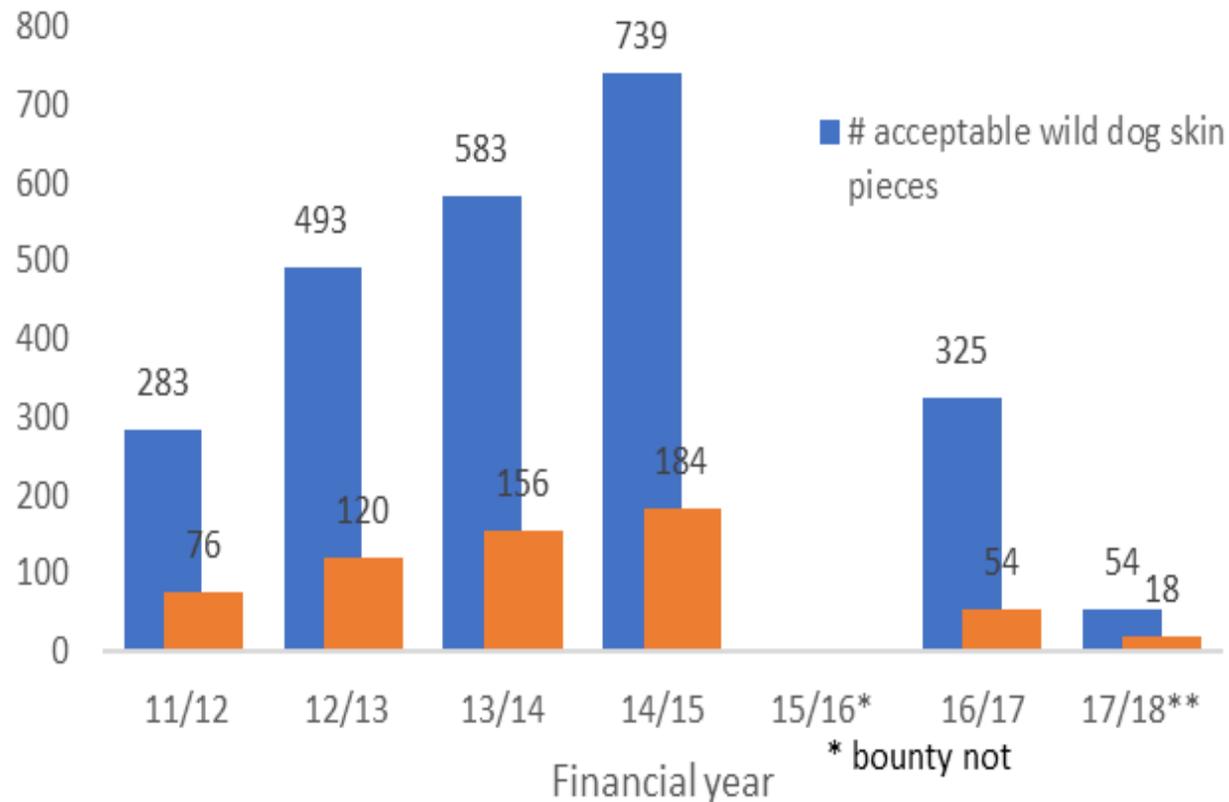
**@ approx. 10 baits
per kilometer.**

**Poison industry currently
lobbying for 40 baits per
kilometer.**

The 'wild dog' bounty

Indications are that the wild dog bounty is having a serious impact on dingo population numbers in Victoria.

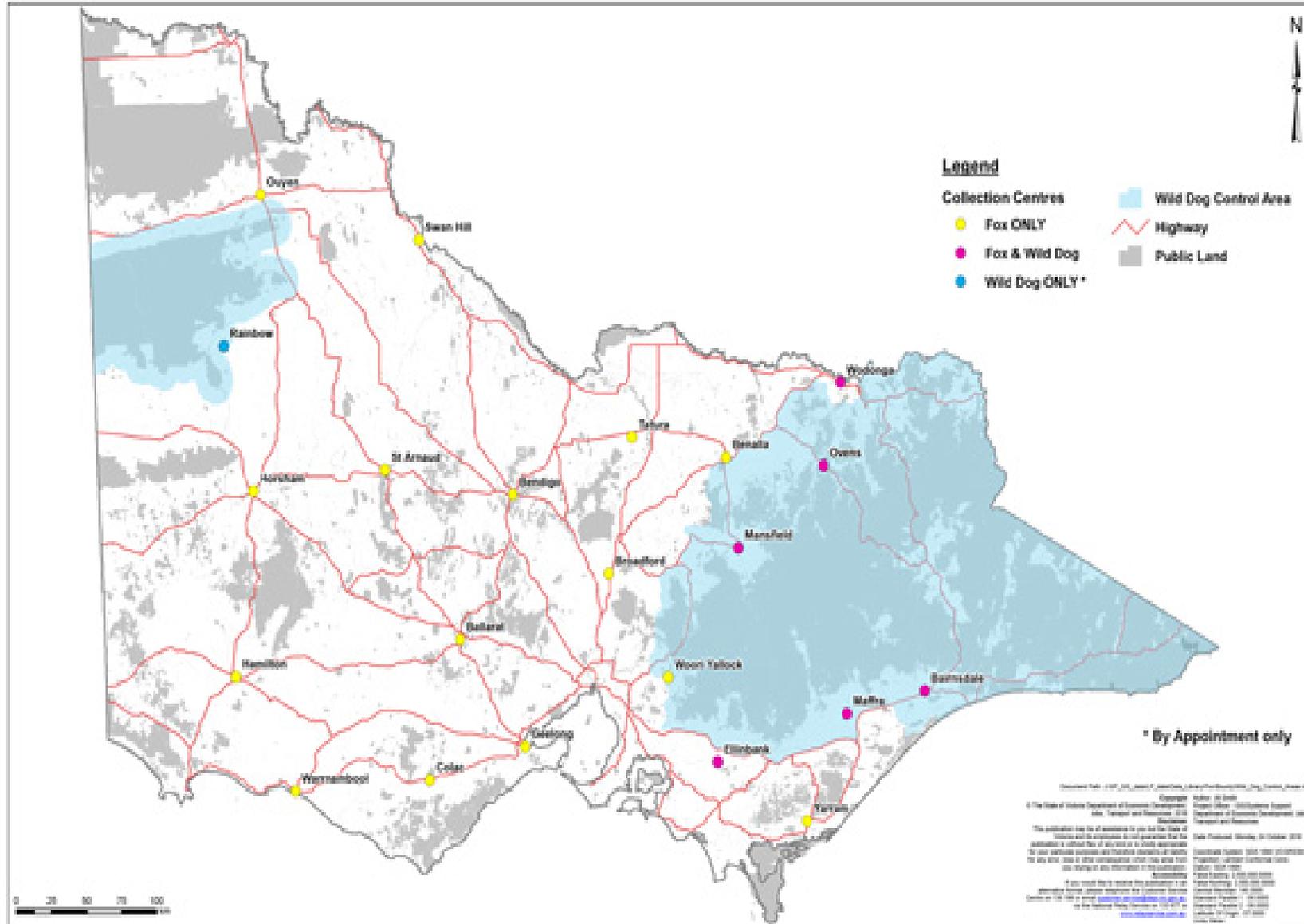
Wild dog bounty collection figures from 2011/12 to 2017/18



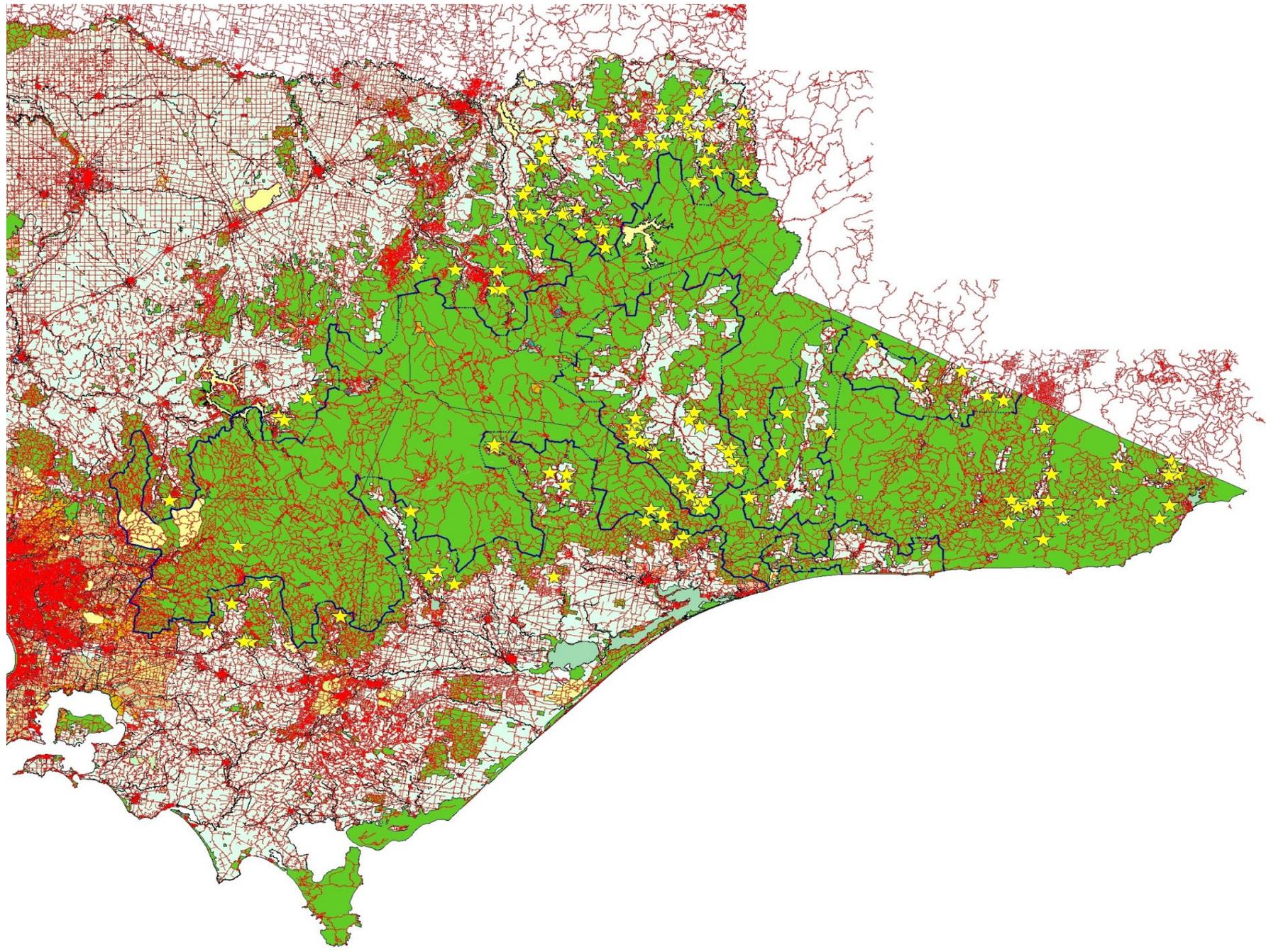
Currently \$120 per dingo scalp

The bounty is problematic:

- **Puts a bounty on the head of a listed threatened species**
- **Compliance requirements are weak; eligible dingo scalps are only allowed to be taken from within the 3 kilometer buffer zone at the interface of private and public lands. There is no reliable checking of this; scalps could be from anywhere, including interstate.**
- **Agriculture Victoria's online information on where scalps can be legally taken is seriously misleading.**
- **It is so crudely misleading, that any reasonable observer may wonder if it is deliberate.**
- **Eligible scalps can only be taken from the 3 kilometer buffer at the interface of private and public land. This is not obvious from the map or text on the departmental website**



(<https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/biosecurity/pest-animals/victorian-fox-and-wild-dog->



A fundamental policy reset is required

**Some internal government departmental
cultures will need to be reformed accordingly**

Recommendations

- 1: Broaden the definition of the dingo under the current FFG Act dingo threatened species listing to include dingoes that test 75-100% pure, (to be governed as wildlife).**
- 2: Recognize high conservation value dingo hybrids as wildlife under the Victorian Wildlife Act 1975 (i.e. in the > 50% <75% purity range)**
- 3: Prohibit recreational hunting of dingoes and dingo hybrids on Crown Land**
- 4: Maximise and support landholder reliance upon non-lethal farm livestock protection measures**

Recommendations

5: Introduce a system of financial compensation to farmers for verified stock loss, as an alternative to lethal control.

6: Explore options for dingo reintroduction into habitats where it has been extirpated, for example in the Murray Sunset National Park and Gariwerd lands.

7: Conduct an independent public inquiry into the now excessive industry-based influence within the Victorian agriculture bureaucracy with regard to pest animal policy and lethal control programs.

