



National Feral Deer Action Plan



Photo of chital deer pushing under fence, by Luke Woodford provided by Centre for Invasive Species Solutions

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2023-28



Foreword

Feral deer are a growing threat to Australia's primary industries, natural environments and community values. Feral deer populations are increasing and spreading across Australia and are projected to cover much of the continent.

Current controls are inadequate to manage the impacts of deer populations – we need to adopt new tools and approaches to protect our primary production, the environment, cultural heritage and communities.

Australia's feral deer problem costs land managers and governments tens of millions of dollars every year. Land managers are paying more each year for measures to protect the land, through activities such as deer culling or exclusion fences. Transport departments are also increasing culling and fencing along highways and railways to reduce vehicle collisions with feral deer. Local governments are struggling to cull feral deer in urban and peri urban areas, gardens and ovals. Across Australia, people are starting to recognise the problem and are taking action to tackle what some have termed Australia's worst emerging vertebrate pest problem.

The Australian Government, and state and territory governments are investing more than \$40 million on feral deer research and management between 2018-2024. A key part of this response is a national coordinator and new research programs.

Communities are forming feral deer control groups, to network and share ideas and successes. Commonwealth and state and territory agencies, local governments and not-for-profit and corporate organisations, are supporting these efforts in partnership to improve feral deer management.

This National Feral Deer Action Plan aims to build on this momentum and support coordinated effective feral deer management to reduce their impacts on Australia's agriculture, environment, cultural and social assets.

The plan was written in consultation with the National Feral Deer Working Group members, who gratefully acknowledge the work of all partners across Australia who helped build this plan.

The Traditional Owners of the land, sea and waters that we live and work on across Australia are acknowledged. We recognise their input into this plan, its implementation, continuing connection to their culture, and we pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

From the National Feral Deer Action Plan Working Group

Executive summary

Australia's feral deer problem is increasing. In just 30 years, land managers in both rural and urban areas have seen feral deer go from being a novelty to being widespread in many parts of the country. Feral deer can be so damaging that many land managers believe they are emerging as 'Australia's next rabbit plague'. Feral deer impact our agricultural production, environmental and cultural assets, and pose risks to biosecurity and community safety.

States and territories have different policies for managing feral deer – most states treat feral deer as pests, while some treat them as wildlife or hunting resources (with some provisions for land managers to control them if they choose). Some regions or jurisdictions also manage different species of deer that are at different stages of establishment, with varying priority and management goals. These differences have added extra challenges to controlling feral deer across the country.

Feral deer have the capacity to inhabit much of Australia, but their distributions are still concentrated in eastern Australia. Australia has a precious window of opportunity to prevent more areas incurring future impacts of feral deer. Every effort must be made to protect the areas where there are currently no deer, contain existing populations and reduce the area where feral deer are currently found. This plan uses the biosecurity approach of prevention, eradication, containment, and asset protection to stem the spread and impacts of feral deer in Australia.

This plan addresses the need for a coordinated and strategic approach to managing Australia's feral deer problem, including priority areas for the protection of threatened species, ecological communities and nationally significant conservation assets.

The plan focuses on improving tools, strategies, capacity, awareness and efficiencies to reduce impacts of feral deer over landscape scales, to acceptable levels, where local communities, regions or jurisdictions wish to do so, and to eradicate them where it is feasible. It is not within the scope of this plan to set objectives for managing deer as a hunting resource (for trophies, meat or recreation). This is because the approaches to sustain or improve hunting experiences are different from the best practice approaches to reduce or minimise the impacts of feral deer.

Goals

The plan takes an aspirational, multifaceted approach to reduce the impacts of feral deer, by focusing on three goals:

1. Stop the spread of large populations of feral deer and reduce their impact.
2. Control (drive down densities as far as possible) or eradicate small, isolated populations before they spread.
3. Prioritise and protect significant sites from impacts from feral deer (threatened species, ecological communities and places of national and international cultural or environmental significance).

The goals of this plan will be achieved by nine priority actions (Figure 1) and other actions in Table 1, some of which will depend on levels of available resourcing.

Expected outcomes

The goals and approach of this plan aspires to guide consistent and effective control actions across Australia, to achieve six short-term outcomes by 2028:

- Land managers will be more aware of feral deer impacts, and can access more tools and options to control feral deer more quickly and effectively.
- Priority assets in the current large distributions of feral deer will be less impacted.
- The spread of feral deer in and beyond the containment buffer zone will slow or stop. Communities and land management agencies will treat feral deer in these areas as new incursion species to be removed or prevented, with timely reporting of sightings, and rapid response.
- The spread of feral deer into peri-urban areas will stop or slow.
- Significant places of conservation or cultural value will be better protected from feral deer.
- Habitats recovering from bushfires will be better protected from feral deer.



Photo of rusa deer, by Ashley Carlson provided by Centre for Invasive Species Solutions

Within 10 years (by 2033), the plan's actions will contribute to three long-term outcomes:

- Community groups will use best practice control methods to reduce impacts of feral deer.
- Large populations of feral deer will reduce in density around valued assets.
- Outlying populations of feral deer will be eradicated or contained, and new populations will be responded to rapidly.
- Feral deer are not significantly impacting Australia's natural heritage, culture, agricultural economy, or public safety.

There is an imperative to contain distributions (including for different deer species) to prevent feral deer becoming another widespread invasive pest like rabbits, pigs and foxes. The next five years will be important to invest in establishing actions and generate momentum for strategic, collaborative control in the future. These actions can be tackled if tools are low-effort, accessible, cost-effective, enable feral deer to be readily detected and are humane, and are used collaboratively and strategically by stakeholders, together.

Purpose

The plan has been developed to establish a national coordinated approach to actively suppress Australian feral deer populations to reduce their impact on Australia's agricultural productivity, environment, threatened species and ecological communities, nationally and internationally significant places of high conservation or cultural value, and social communities. A variety of laws require that all of us have a shared responsibility to enable effective management of feral deer. The plan provides guidance and actions for:

- local, state and territory, and Australian governments,
- corporate and non-government organisations,
- public and private land managers and groups who are impacted by feral deer, or are likely to be impacted soon,
- people engaged in integrated control programs for the primary purpose of reducing feral deer populations (including ground shooters, traditional owners and commercial harvesters), and
- First Nations groups seeking to protect areas of cultural values.

This plan applies at the national level, to guide policy, strategy and planning to manage feral deer impacts in Australia.

For the purpose of this plan, feral deer control promotes highly experienced ground and aerial shooters, and commercial harvesters undertaking culling activities as part of integrated pest animal control programs. The most important attribute of a feral deer control program is the timely removal of enough feral deer to reduce impacts and sustainability of feral deer populations.

A note on recreational hunting

Feral deer are a game animal in some jurisdictions, where hunting opportunities are a pastime, hobby, sport or for consumption of meat.

Feral deer densities and distribution across much of Australia are increasing, and recreational hunting programs are not containing feral deer or reducing feral deer population growth. Recreational hunting as a component of ground culling removes some feral deer but on its own, it has been shown to have little impact on population growth, and additional tools are required.

This plan highlights opportunities for recreational hunters and sporting shooters to support feral deer control programs as a component of ground culling if programs adopt the following principles:

- prioritising the removal of female feral deer,
- focusing efforts where feral deer are destroying ecosystems, threatening biosecurity, primary industries or social amenity,
- hunting feral deer at night with spotlights,
- removing more feral deer than the number that are born,
- coordinating efforts across property boundaries,
- using equipment that can increase the efficiency of culling programs (e.g. thermal or night vision optics and suppressors, as licensed and if permitted by legislation).

This plan uses the term **recreational hunting**

when referring to ad-hoc hunting at small property scales, for purposes of harvesting trophies or meat. It uses the term **ground culling** when referring to shooting services (paid or unpaid) that are specifically designed and evaluated to reduce more than the feral deer population recruitment rate each year over a large area. The latter programs do not involve harvesting meat or antlers for personal use (as these are components of recreation hunting).

Plan at a Glance

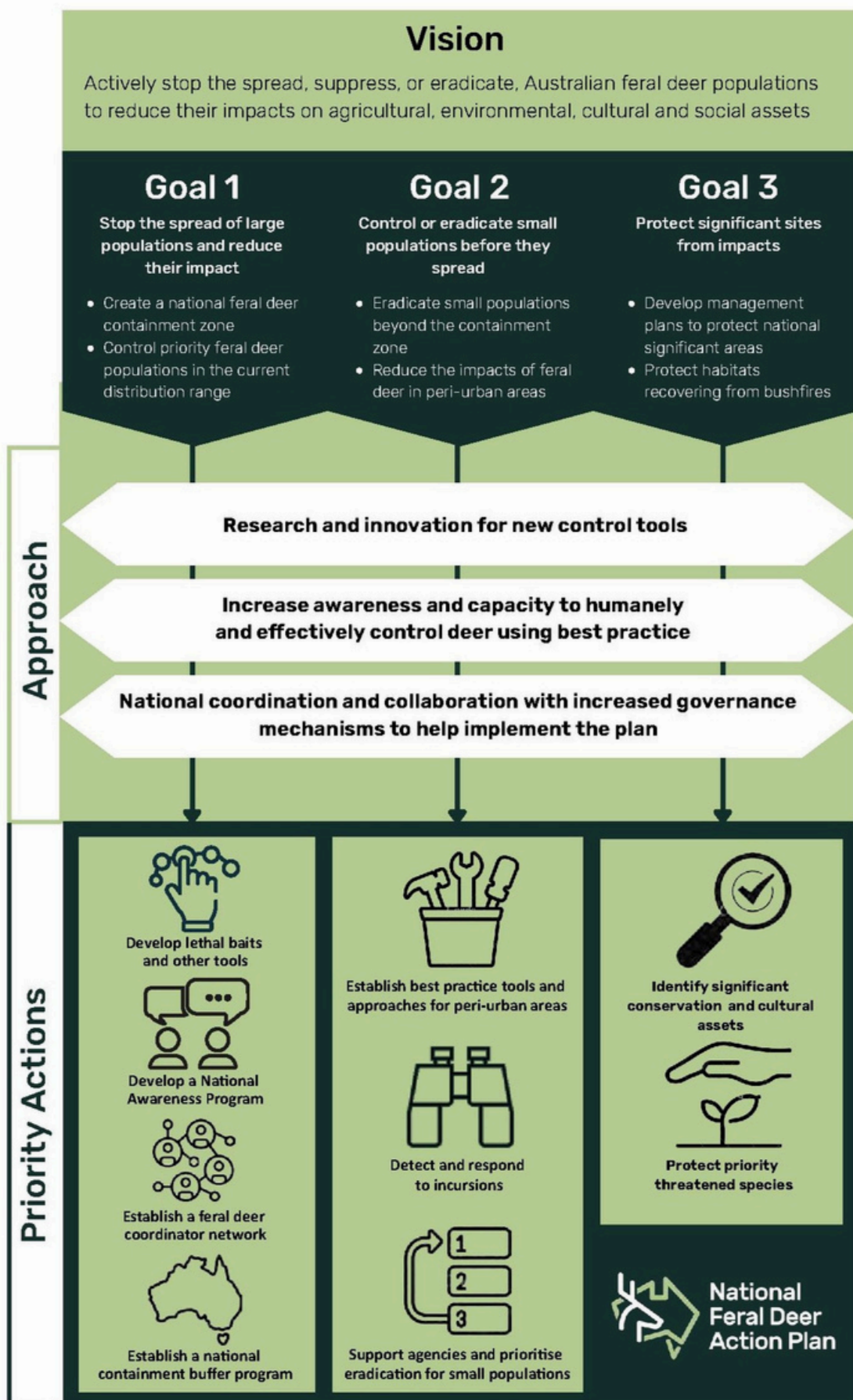


Figure 1. A summary of the plan's vision, goals, approach and priority actions

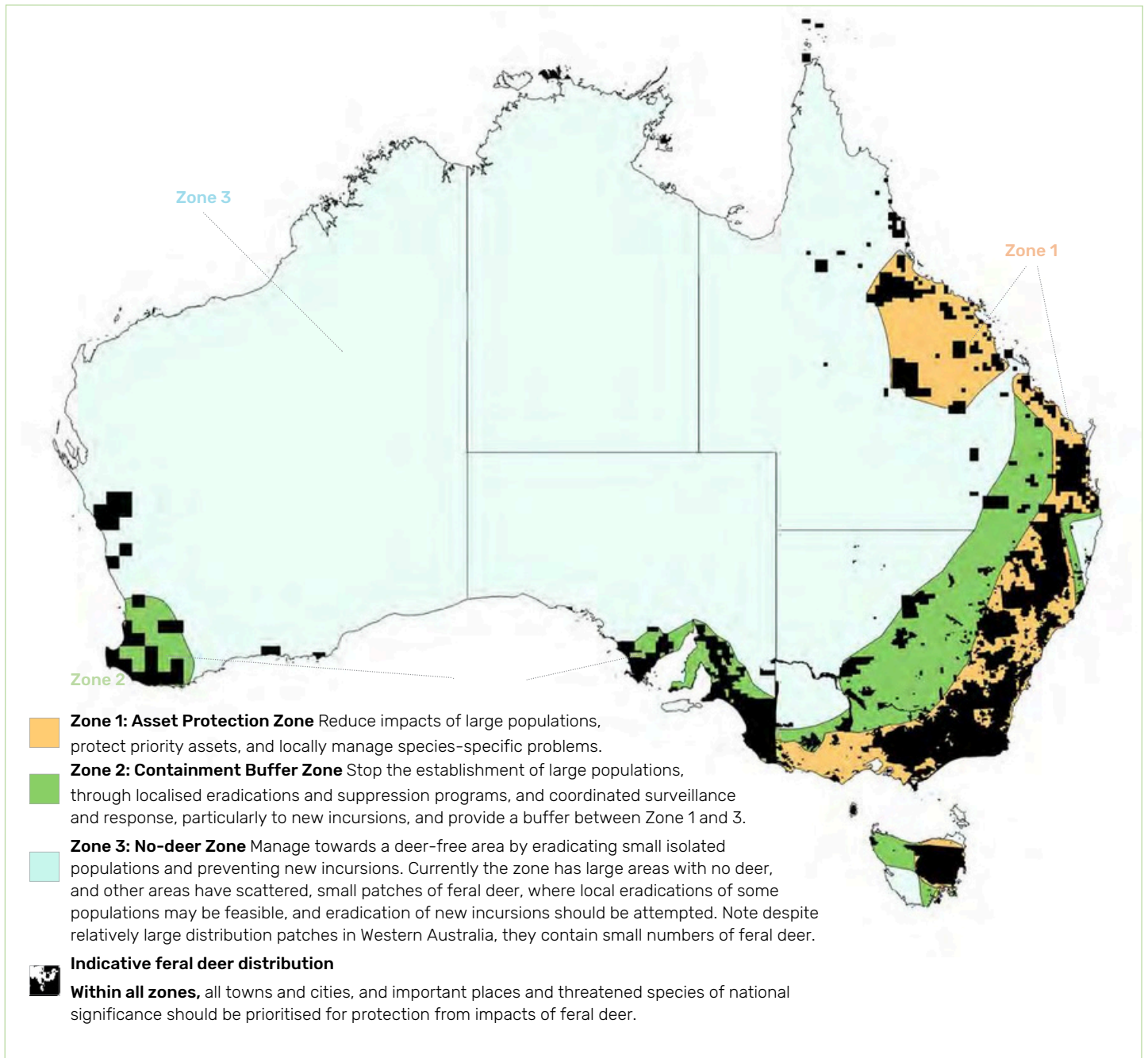


Figure 5. Distributions of feral deer are concentrated to different degrees in 3 zones across Australia

This plan takes a coordinated, best-practice approach to managing feral deer, by focusing actions toward the 3 goals that target both large and small populations of feral deer across Australia (Figure 5). They align with the principles and priorities of the Australian Pest Animal Strategy 2017–27, and state and territory feral deer management strategies.





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