

February 4, 2025

Saanich council hops forward with request for provincial leadership on feral rabbits

SAANICH, BC – A resolution calling on the provincial government to create a strategy to address root causes of feral rabbits province-wide was passed unanimously at District of Saanich council last night. The resolution is on its way to the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities (AIVCC) for their endorsement.

Abandonment and the following rapid proliferation of feral European rabbits in parks and public spaces is a hot button issue that has plagued municipalities across the province for well over two decades. This ongoing issue leads to negative impacts on ecosystems, native wildlife, urban infrastructure, and public health and safety. The welfare of the feral rabbits also needs to be addressed, and they need non-lethal solutions.

"Feral rabbits are becoming an increasing challenge for many communities - they are a risk to our environment, infrastructure, and to public safety," says Saanich Councillor Teale Phelps Bondaroff, who initiated the resolution at council. "Municipalities and small charities have been left to tackle this issue alone, but without coordinated provincial support, efforts remain inconsistent and ineffective. Leadership from the province is essential to addressing the root causes and preventing further damage to ecosystems and infrastructure."

One rescue organization believes the Granville Island feral rabbit population grew from only two rabbits to 40 over a single winter.¹

"Ultimately, the individual communities managing this issue are not the ones responsible for its root causes," explains Lesley Fox, Executive Director of The Fur-Bearers. "There is a lack of regulations around breeding and the widespread selling of unsterilized rabbits, a lack of education for pet owners, and a clear need for provincial support. We support this resolution as it calls on the province to address the root causes of this issue."

The Saanich resolution was also supported by the BC SPCA.

The motion for resolution was passed unanimously at the Monday, February 3 meeting of District of Saanich Council and will next be debated at the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities. If it passes there, the resolution will move on to the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM), and if it is adopted there, it will become part of UBCM's advocacy towards the province.

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A copy of the resolution as it was passed (including an amendment) is attached.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/granville-island-rabbits-vancouver-abandoned-pets-1.7063926>

CONTACTS:

Lesley Fox

Executive Director, The Fur-Bearers

604-435-1850

lesley@thefurbearers.com

Councillor Teale N. Phelps Bondaroff *

District of Saanich

778-678-8325

tealepb@gmail.com

* Teale est disponible pour des entretiens en français.

Resolution:

Provincial Support for Addressing Feral Rabbits

WHEREAS numerous municipalities are struggling with the abandonment and rapid proliferation of feral European rabbits in parks and public spaces, and these invasive animals have a negative impact on ecosystems, native wildlife, urban infrastructure and greenspaces, and public health and safety;

AND WHEREAS the current approach to addressing this issue is uncoordinated and poorly funded, placing all of the responsibility on the shoulders of municipalities and small under-funded not-for-profits, leading to an inconsistent and ineffective response;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT AVICC and UBCM urge the provincial government to develop a coordinated, province-wide strategy to address the root causes of feral rabbit abandonment across BC.

Abbreviated Background:

British Columbia is home to five species of rabbits and hares, including the invasive European rabbit, which is the same species as domestic pet rabbits. These rabbits are often abandoned by owners and can be found in urban parks, parking lots, and residential areas. Once released, they reproduce rapidly, causing harm to local ecosystems, infrastructure, and public health. Their presence strains municipal resources, as cities and underfunded charities struggle to manage growing feral populations without sufficient support or expertise. While some municipalities have passed bylaws regulating rabbit sales, the problem remains largely unaddressed across the province.

Feral European rabbits pose significant environmental and public safety risks. They compete with native wildlife for resources, damage habitats through overgrazing and burrowing, and disrupt predator-prey dynamics. Their tunneling can also weaken sidewalks, roads, and utility corridors, leading to costly infrastructure repairs. Additionally, European rabbits can spread rabbit hemorrhagic disease (RHD), a highly contagious virus that threatens both domestic and wild rabbit populations. Despite their classification as an invasive species under British Columbia's Wildlife Act, there is little oversight, increasing the likelihood of inhumane treatment.

The financial and logistical burden of addressing feral rabbit populations currently falls on municipalities and small nonprofits, which lack the resources to tackle the issue effectively. Past removal efforts, such as

the University of Victoria's 2010 rabbit management program, have proven costly. The core issue lies in the unregulated sale of unsterilized rabbits and the lack of public education on responsible pet ownership. This resolution calls on the province to implement regulations and management strategies to address the root causes of feral rabbit overpopulation, ensuring a humane and sustainable solution to this growing problem.

A complete background document is attached to the email.