

Notice of Motion: Draft AVICC/UBCM Resolution

From: Councillor Phelps Bondaroff

Submitted: January 20, 2025

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.

Background

Five species of rabbits and hares can be found in British Columbia. These include Eastern and Nuttall's cottontails, snowshoe hares, white tailed jackrabbits, and European rabbits. European rabbits are the same species as domestic pet rabbits and are considered a feral and invasive species. European rabbits are distinguishable by their heavier build and diverse coat colours, such as black, tan, grey, white, orange, or patchy patterns. Unfortunately, many European rabbits encountered outdoors are pets that have been abandoned by their owners.¹ These feral animals can have a significant and negative impact on ecosystems, native wildlife, urban infrastructure and greenspaces, and public health and safety.

It is a criminal act under the *Criminal Code of Canada*,² and an offence under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (BC)*,³ to abandon domestic rabbits in the wild. Despite this, European rabbits, can often be encountered in city parks, near highways, in parking lots, around shopping centers, businesses, and residential backyards.⁴

Currently, the responsibility for addressing these feral populations falls on the shoulders of municipalities and a handful of charities and rescue organizations. Municipalities often lack the resources and expertise to effectively and humanely address this problem. As a result, much of the work falls to small, poorly funded, not-for-profit organizations, who engage in advocacy and education, as well as rescues, when resources allow.

Only a handful of municipalities have passed by-laws regulating the sale of rabbits (for example Vancouver,⁵ Kelowna,⁶ and Nanaimo⁷), however, most do not and the issue of overpopulation of feral rabbits is largely unaddressed.

Issue

Unsterilized European rabbit species are commonly dumped or released into the wild, and due to their prolific breeding, their populations can quickly expand and become established. This can have numerous negative effects on animal welfare, ecosystems and wildlife, public safety, and infrastructure.

Animal welfare

European rabbit species are listed under Schedule C of the *Wildlife Act in British Columbia*. Schedule C animals are typically invasive that can be hunted or captured without a license and are

¹ BC SPCA (n.d.). "Rabbits and hares." Available at <https://spca.bc.ca/ways-to-help/take-action/urban-wildlife/rabbits-and-hares/>

² Government of Canada, 1985, *Cruelty to Animals. Criminal Code of Canada, Section 446.1b*

³ Government of British Columbia, 1996, *Offences. Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, Section 24(1)*.

⁴ Abandoned Rabbits. (n.d.). Available at <https://map.abandonedrabbits.com/>

⁵ City of Vancouver. (2017 December 12). "A By-law to Amend License By-law No. 4450 Regarding the Sale of Dogs, Cats and Rabbits by Pet Stores." Available at <https://bylaws.vancouver.ca/consolidated/12000.pdf>

⁶ City of Kelowna. (2022 October 3). "Bylaw No. 5421-82 – Animal and poultry regulation and animal pound bylaw." Available at

<https://apps.kelowna.ca/CityPage/Docs/PDFs/Bylaws/Animal%20and%20Poultry%20Regulation%20and%20Animal%20Pound%20Bylaw%20No.%205421-82.pdf>

⁷ City of Nanaimo. (2021 September 21). "Bylaw No. 7316 – Animal responsibility bylaw." Available at <https://www.nanaimo.ca/bylaws/ViewBylaw/7316.pdf>

not subject to seasonal restrictions.⁸ These rabbits are classified as a Regional Containment/Control species on the *BC Provincial Priority Invasive Species List*.⁹ As a result, a lack of oversight and regulation could lead to the inhumane treatment of these animals.

Environment

European rabbit species compete with native wildlife for resources like food, water, and shelter. This can lead to significant negative impacts on native species, including at-risk and endangered animals, insects, and plants. Population explosions can change predator-prey dynamics. Burrowing and other activities can also lead to the degradation of ecosystems, including overgrazing, increased erosion, and soil deterioration.

Public safety

Rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD) is a virus that affects lagomorphs (rabbits and hares). A novel variety from Europe has been found in Canada.¹⁰ While this illness poses no direct risk to humans, this highly contagious virus that can be spread to native species. This virus is best managed through biosecurity protocols and direct vaccinations – neither of which are tenable in large, European-based populations or with native species.¹¹

Infrastructure Damage

European rabbits graze extensively, which can have a significant impact on municipal properties like community parks, activity areas, and other greenspaces, leading to increased costs to municipalities. Unlike native species, European rabbits burrow and tunnel and this behaviour can lead to soil erosion, collapsing or cracking of sidewalks, roads, and foundations over time, and damage to utilities and utility corridors. The uneven ground caused by all these activities can lead to trip hazards and other safety concerns for pedestrians, cyclists, and other outdoor recreational activities.

Rationale for UBCM Resolution

As it stands, the responsibility for addressing feral rabbit populations falls largely on the shoulders of individual municipalities with the support of small, under funded not-for-profits. This is an expensive proposition, and actors often lack the resources to effectively address the problem. As an example, when the University of Victoria worked to remove feral rabbit populations from campus in 2010, it cost as much as \$348 per rabbit.¹²

⁸ Government of BC. (2022 July 1). *Wildlife Act - Designation and Exemption Regulation - Schedule C*, B.C. Reg. 253/2000, App. 2, s. 9; am. B.C. Regs. 32/2014, ss. 9 and 10; 143/2022, s. 10. Available at https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/13_168_90#ScheduleC

⁹ Invasive Species Council of BC. (n.d.). "European rabbit." Available at <https://bcinvasives.ca/invasives/european-rabbit/>

¹⁰ Rich, G. (2021). "Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV)." *VCA Canada*. Available at <https://vcacanada.com/known-your-pet/rabbit-hemorrhagic-disease-virus-rhdv>

¹¹ Government of BC. (n.d.). "Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease." Available at https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/agriculture-and-seafood/animal-and-crops/animal-disease/rhd_updated_20240311.pdf

¹² Moneo, S. (2010 March 30). "UVic's rabbit population facing cull." *The Globe and Mail*. Available at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/uvics-rabbit-population-facing-cull/article1366424/>

The challenge is that these actors are not able to address the root causes of this problem. These include a lack of regulations that facilitates the widespread sale of unsterilized rabbits, inadequate education for (prospective) pet owners, and the provincial support for management programs. This resolution calls on the province to explore ways of addressing the root causes that lead to the proliferation of feral rabbits across the BC.

Past UBCM Trapping Related Resolutions

Year	Number	Resolution Title	Convention Decision	Sponsor(s)
2010	B134	Prohibition of the Sale of Rabbits in Pet Stores	Not endorsed	Richmond
2012	B123	Regulating the Sale of Unsterilized Rabbits	Endorsed	Delta

Provincial response to 2012 - B123

Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development Under the Community Charter s. 83k, municipalities have the authority to adopt bylaws to regulate, prohibit and impose requirements in relation to animals, subject to any provincial regulations. B.C. Regulation 1442004 Community Charter Spheres of Concurrent Jurisdiction - Environment and Wildlife Regulation identifies rabbits as alien invasive species. Therefore, municipalities are authorized to control and eradicate those alien invasive species, except in cases where the species is part of a farm operation as defined under the Farm Practices Protection Right to Farm Act. Additionally, Community Charter s. 86 authorizes municipalities to regulate in relation to businesses. In relation to a bylaw banning the sale of puppies and dogs from pet stores, the British Columbia Supreme Court in *International Bio Research v. Richmond City*, 2011 BCSC 471 found that this authority could be used to prohibit such sales provided there is a valid municipal purpose for doing so and the bylaw is not unreasonable or otherwise impermissibly discriminatory. Given the potential scope of municipal regulatory authority, the Provincial Government does not intend to pursue legislation to regulate the sale of unsterilized rabbits at this time.

APPENDIX

Media coverage about roaming rabbits, rescue attempts, and related issues in recent years:

- Victoria News (August 18, 2024) [Island rabbit rescue having to turn away people bringing in bunnies](#)
- Peace Arch News (April 3, 2024) [Surrendered, abandoned rabbits on the rise in South Surrey, White Rock](#)
- CBC News (March 29, 2024) [Shelter space dwindling as feral rabbit colonies multiple](#)
- CBC News (December 19, 2023) [Animal rescue removes rabbits at risk of being put down from Vancouver's Granville Island](#)
- CBC News (October 2, 2023) [Group protests cull of Granville Island rabbits](#)
- CTV News (September 27, 2023) [Rabbits on Granville Island being trapped, euthanized amid coyote concerns](#)
- The Abbotsford News (June 9, 2023) [SPCA seizes 162 rabbits from Abbotsford property](#)
- Canadaland (April 10, 2023) [Down the Rabbit Hole: The Story of the UVic Bunnies](#)
- CBC News (April 10, 2023) [Rescues struggle to house rejected rabbits as feral bunny boom spreads across Metro Vancouver](#)
- Richmond News (March 31, 2023) ['Please don't buy one': Rabbit rescue society encourages people to adopt](#)
- Victoria News (March 30, 2023) [Rabbit family dumped in Esquimalt sparks concerns area will be overrun once again](#)
- CTV News (March 29, 2023) [Rabbit rescue society warns Vancouver's feral population is about to boom, unless the city steps in](#)
- Richmond News (March 11, 2023) ['They were frozen': Abandoned pet bunnies found inside box along B.C. street](#)
- Richmond News (January 31, 2023) [BC SPCA investigating baby bunny dump at Richmond shelter](#)
- The Tyee (January 27, 2023) [Overrun with buns](#)
- CityNews Vancouver (January 4, 2023) [B.C. rescue organization struggling to keep up with abandoned bunnies](#)
- Vancouver Is Awesome (August 15, 2022) [BC SPCA seizes 32 rabbits being bred for profit in downtown Vancouver](#)
- Richmond News (June 23, 2022) [B.C. amends legislation to help control feral rabbits; rescue group says changes, 'Too little, too late.'](#)
- CBC News (April 17, 2022) [As bunnies take over Vancouver park, humans warned against getting too close](#)
- CTV News (April 17, 2022) [Stop releasing pet rabbits at Jericho Beach, invasive species council says](#)
- Comox Valley Record (April 13, 2022) [Abundance of bunnies sparks B.C. shelter appeal for foster homes](#)
- CTV News (June 23, 2021) [Vancouver airport has hired someone to shoot and kill its unwanted rabbit population](#)
- Vancouver Island Free Daily (June 18, 2021) [Wild rabbits persist at the University of Victoria](#)
- CTV News (April 28, 2021) [Rabbits with snares around necks rescued in Richmond](#)

- Parksville Qualicum Beach News (July 10, 2019) [Feral rabbits in your yard? You're on your own in Parksville](#)
- Goldstream News gazette (July 10, 2019) [Rascally rabbits destroy Vancouver Island lawns](#)
- Sooke News Mirror (November 23, 2018) [Herds of feral rabbits at threat in Greater Victoria](#)
- CBC News (May 25, 2018) [Richmond rabbit shelter at max capacity as problem bunnies run amok](#)
- Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows News (February 28, 2018) [A dozen dead rabbits found near B.C. sports facility](#)
- Maclean's (September 30, 2016) [Free the bunnies: Why B.C. rabbits are being airlifted to Texas](#)
- Global News (August 16, 2016) [B.C. government ratcheting up war against abandoned bunnies in Victoria interchange](#)
- CBC News (August 16, 2016) [B.C. government steps up highway bunny battle in Victoria](#)
- CBC News (April 4, 2015) [Nanaimo overrun with feral rabbits](#)
- Agassiz-Harrison Observer (September 28, 2012) [Rabbit rampage sparks call for pet store ban](#)
- CBC News (April 8, 2012) [Feral rabbit problem growing at Richmond Auto Mall](#)
- CBC News (January 20, 2011) [Bunny cull returning to UVic](#)
- The Georgia Straight (January 17, 2011) [Lesley Fox: In Year of the Rabbit, over-population crisis looms across B.C.](#)
- CBC News (April 18, 2009) [Bunny battle goes ballistic at UVic campus](#)
- CBC News (September 29, 2008) [Culling of rabbits in Kelowna sparks police probe](#)
- CBC News (May 13, 2008) [Feral rabbits to be culled in Kelowna](#)
- CBC News (December 7, 2007) [Interior B.C. cities on brink of bunny boom](#)