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Media Release

EXPORT OF BRUSHTAIL POSSUMS OPPOSED

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The Against Animal Cruelty Tasmania, Wildlife Tasmania and Tasmanian Conservation Trust today voiced their collective opposition to the planned export of brushtail possums from Tasmania. The groups said the proposal to export around 100,000 brushtail possums from Tasmania will lead to a massive increase in animal suffering, an increased burden on animal carers and will fail to deliver the benefits to farmers and forestry companies claimed by the State Government.

The Tasmanian Government referred the 'Draft Management Plan for the Commercial Harvest and Export of Brushtail Possums 2010-2014' to the Australian Government in March 2010 for assessment under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. It proposes quotas for taking and exporting up to 104,125 brush-tailed possums per year. The public comment period closed on 23 April 2010. The State Government's 'Animal Welfare Guidelines – Code of Practice for the Capture, Handling, Transport and Slaughter of Brush-tail Possums' will apply to any operator seeking to take possums for export.

Increased suffering

"Under the proposed export Management Plan, possums will not be shot in the field, but will be trapped alive and transported long distances before they are slaughtered", said AACT Spokesperson Chris Simcox.

"A Code of Practice exists but no Code can stop these naturally shy, nocturnal wild animals suffering from deprivation of food and water during up to 48 hours of captivity, extremes of temperature, strange noises and exposure to bright lights.

"AACT and its supporters are completely against any commercial use of wild animals. It is never warranted and denies the worth of individual animals and their place in nature. The Tasmanian and Australian governments need to be told there should be no commercial possum industry in this state."

During the public comment period on the Draft Management Plan, AACT had 400 people in one week join its Facebook page dedicated to protecting

brushtail possums from commercial exploitation. This has now risen to well over 600 people.

“People are very passionate about saving brushtail possums from the fate of being put on the menu in Asian countries or made into clothes,” continued Mr Simcox.

Linked to the Facebook page is footage taken of possums being killed in the purpose-built abattoir when it was in operation in 2004.

“The images, showing possums having their throats cut whilst still struggling and conscious and young being bashed to death against a trough, are enough to turn the stomach of even the most hard-hearted person,” concluded Mr Simcox.

Increased burden on animal carers

Perhaps the worst aspect of having a possum export industry is that thousands of young possum joeys will be taken from their mothers and either killed by hunters if very young or given to animal carers in the vain hope they can be rescued.

“Wildlife carers are sick of shooters and trappers expecting them to care for joeys that have been taken from their mothers,” said Peter Power of Wildlife Tasmania (a network of wildlife carers). “Each animal costs about \$250 a year to rehabilitate and the costs are borne by each volunteer carer as there is no form of funding to assist them”.

“People who earn money out of killing adult possums should be made to contribute to the full costs of rehabilitating orphaned joeys that they pass onto wildlife carers. Even then there are not enough wildlife carers in the state to handle the amount of joeys that would be forced into their care,” Peter Power concluded.

No gain for primary producers

“The State Government is attempting an enormous con job by claiming that exporting possums will prevent the current wastage of culled possums and provide a service to farmers and forestry companies by reducing damage to crops and plantations,” said TCT Director Peter McGlone.

“The management plan states that ‘the commercial industry will expand under this management plan and the non-commercial take decrease accordingly’ (page 34) but provides no evidences to substantiate the claim.

“This is just a crude attempt to make killing possums for profit seem more acceptable. The truth is that wallabies are a far bigger problem for farmers and it is unlikely that exporters will target areas where forestry companies are establishing plantations.

“If export is allowed, we will see an enormous increase in the numbers of possums killed in Tasmania with little or no reduction in the amount of culling done by forestry companies and farmers.

"The State Government should be encouraging farmers and foresters to use non-lethal alternatives to control browsing animals such as subsidising fencing and supporting development of browsing resistant seedlings," concluded Mr McGlone.

The TCT opposes the Draft Management Plan but if the Australian Government fails to refuse the plan, we recommend it be amended to:

- require the animal welfare code to be strengthened through a thorough public review;
- require exporters to pay the full cost of monitoring possum populations and administering the export management plan;
- state that the true goal of the plan is to facilitate a new commercial enterprise based on killing possums and that no evidence exists to show that the current levels of non-commercial culling will be reduced.

Further comment:

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