

29 NOV 2016



OIA16-0629

Gary Stephenson  
c/- FYI website

Dear Gary Stephenson

**OFFICIAL INFORMATION ACT REQUEST**

I refer to your official information request on 25 October 2016 relating to the following questions:

- How much money has been granted to Landcare Research to research new Rabbit Haemorrhagic Viruses (RHDV) for each of the past 5 years?
- How much money has been granted to Landcare Research to ensure vaccines are available for any rabbit haemorrhagic virus they are researching?

The Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) has provided funding to Landcare Research for one project and committed funding for a second project relating to RHDV in the last five years. I have provided the funding amount and a summary of each project below:

1. 2012/13 - 3 year project: *Rabbit Biocontrol Initiative: Better RHDV strains for improved rabbit control in NZ* - Landcare Research (on behalf of Waikari Pest Management Liaison Committee). MPI provided \$480,000 of funding from the Sustainable Farming Fund (SFF) initiative.

RHDV is a vital biocontrol tool for rabbits in New Zealand, greatly reducing costs to farmers and land degradation in rabbit prone areas. However, the effectiveness of RHDV is waning, with rabbit numbers returning to high densities, and an increasing requirement for more costly poisoning. This project identified high-virulence NZ strains of RHDV and clarified the protective role of pre-existing non-pathogenic rabbit caliciviruses. Improved strains of RHDV were made available to land managers for integration with conventional control to retain the long-term effectiveness of RHDV as a low-cost sustainable method of rabbit control nationwide.

2. 2016/17 - 3 year project: *Release Strategy for improved RHDV Strains to maximise the benefits of rabbit biocontrol* – Landcare Research (on behalf of Waikari Pest Management Liaison Committee). MPI has committed funding up to \$240,000 from the SFF initiative (No funding has been paid yet).

Following its release in 1997 RHDV greatly reduced rabbit numbers but over time its effectiveness has decreased as an increasing proportion of rabbits develop antibodies that protect them against RHDV. Australian scientists have identified a new high virulence RHDV strain (called K5) that partially overcomes resistance to RHDV and is expected to increase rabbit kills by 20-30%. Rabbit stakeholder groups in New Zealand are planning to seek approval for the release of RHDV K5 into New Zealand. This project will provide New Zealand stakeholders and landowners with new information and guidelines that will ensure the timing and method of release adopted for the improved RHDV strain achieves the best possible outcomes and maximises future long term benefits to farmers.

In regard to your second question concerning funding for RHDV vaccines, MPI has not allocated any funding to Landcare Research to be used specifically for the research or production of RHDV vaccines in the last five years. However, the second project above (*Release Strategy for improved RHDV Strains to maximise the benefits of rabbit biocontrol*) requires applications for approval under various legislation, including the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines Act 1997 (the ACVM Act). As advised in your previous correspondence on RHDV, the ACVM Act process will assess wider concerns associated with the use of the any product requiring approval, including the availability of vaccines for pet owners.

I trust this satisfies your request.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Veronica Herrera', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Veronica Herrera  
Director IDC & Response