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media release

## **Humane effective feral horse control essential for Kosciuszko: Scientists**

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A Deakin University ecologist has led a team of 41 Australian scientists to write to New South Wales Premier Mike Baird to urge his Government to protect the Kosciuszko National Park through humane and effective feral horse control.

Ecologist Professor Don Driscoll, from Deakin's Centre for Integrative Ecology, within the School of Life and Environmental Sciences, said the scientists from 16 universities in Queensland, NSW, Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Tasmania had jointly signed a submission supporting the NSW Government's Kosciuszko National Park draft Wild Horse Management Plan.

The scientists have also written separately to Mr Baird, expressing their view that feral horse control is essential under Australia's obligations to protect its unique Alpine natural heritage, and for NSW to meet the legal requirement of the Kosciuszko National Park Plan of Management.

Professor Driscoll said that collectively the signatories to the submission represented the greatest pool of knowledge about alpine ecosystems in Australia.

"Most of us have direct research experience in the Australian alps and in practical land management decision-making," he said.

"It is this deep knowledge of ecology and management which allows us to draw our conclusions that rapid, humane horse control is essential for Kosciuszko National Park to perform its primary function of biodiversity conservation."

"Horses are not compatible with the primary goal of nature conservation in a national park.

“NSW is obliged to manage Kosciuszko National Park in a way that protects ecosystem processes, species and ecosystems that are characteristic of the area.

“This includes unique alpine wetland ecosystems and species such as the corroboree frog and alpine she-oak skink.

“Horses are stock animals recently introduced and are not characteristic of this area, but threaten ecosystem processes, ecosystems and species that are characteristic.”

Professor Driscoll said the estimated number of feral horses across Australia was approximately half a million, which were now degrading much of the nation’s national park ecosystems, including 48 per cent of Kosciuszko National Park.

“Impacts have been documented to its streams, wetlands and catchments and we know that feral horses damage waterways, degrade soil, spread weeds and alter vegetation which is expected to have impacts on native fauna,” he said.

“Current methods of horse control under the 2008 wild horse management plan do not involve culling, with on average just 450 horses removed each year over the last five years, while during the same period horse numbers increased from 4,200 in 2009 to 6,000 today.

“Further, rehoming and domestication of captured horses under the 2008 Plan is not a solution for humane control as only 18 per cent of 3,183 horses removed since 2002 were rehomed.

“The remaining 82 per cent of horses went to abattoirs after a long journey and such prolonged transport was ranked as the worst animal ethics outcome of all the control options considered in the Independent Technical Reference Group report.

Professor Driscoll said fertility control was also not a practicable humane option for reducing horse numbers and the scientists supported its omission from the management plan.

“On balance, fewer animals are predicted to suffer and die under a program of rapid population reduction than under the current management regime,” he said.

While Professor Driscoll said the scientists were supporting of the removal plan, the 20-year time-frame to reduce horse numbers to 600 was too long.

“Given that horse populations increase at up to 20 per cent every year, rapid reduction in an initial management phase is important,” he said.

“For example, at the current population size of 6,000, potentially up to an extra 1,200 horses must be managed next year. If the population was reduced to 100, an extra 20 horses would need to be managed in the following year.

“Rapidly reducing the population will therefore be more cost effective, result in fewer horses being killed over time, minimise horse suffering and prevent further degradation of Australia's unique alpine ecosystems.”

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