
CITY OF KELOWNA

MEMORANDUM

Date: January 15, 2008

File No.: 6130-07

To: City Manager

From: Ian Wilson, Urban Forestry Supervisor

Subject: Management of European rabbits and other problem wildlife

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT the City of Kelowna forward a recommendation to the Board of the Regional District of Central Okanagan, that the Regional Animal Control function be expanded beyond the existing dog control contract, to include the investigation, control and enforcement of nuisance animal complaints, including rabbits.

BACKGROUND:

The Parks Division and a number of other city departments have received increasing numbers of complaints over the last year, regarding European rabbits. Wildlife-related complaints (coyotes, bears, rats, mice, voles, beavers etc.) have generally been increasing over the last several years as well. In many cities, Animal Control responds to a variety of animal complaints, however in Kelowna Regional Animal Control only responds to dog complaints, and there is no agency or department with a mandate or budget to deal with them, therefore citizens often end up calling many different agencies or departments seeking help. The Provincial Conservation Officer Service has indicated that they are unable to respond to most of these complaints, as has the local SPCA.

The Parks Division recently employed a wildlife consultant (EBB Environmental Consulting) with our Canada goose program, and the same consultant also completed a rabbit study for the City of Richmond in 2006/2007. Therefore, we asked EBB for some advice on Kelowna's rabbit situation. Below is a summary of some of their observations and recommendations:

- The urban rabbits seen in Kelowna are not native; they are European rabbits, which originated from people releasing their pets into the environment. It appears that there is still an on-going problem with the release of pet rabbits, because there are quite a few pure albino / white rabbits. White rabbits do not normally occur in a wild, breeding population as that colour is recessive.
- The biologist believes that the rabbits could pose a genuine threat to the local environment and may continue to spread and cause additional problems if nothing is done to control them, since they have few natural predators in an urban environment. They can cause significant damage to crops and landscaping, and can also undermine soil stability or building foundations due to tunnelling.



- Depending on weather conditions, the local population seems to decline in the winter time, although this winter a significant decline hasn't been seen (possibly due to mild temperatures). In February of 2007, the biologist only observed about 30 rabbits in the Enterprise area, but that number had grown to 650 by June 2007, and even more by late summer. They are capable of an extremely high rate of reproduction.
- At the beginning of 2007, the main rabbit populations were located along Enterprise and near Valley/Cross roads. By the end of the year, new populations were observed near Bulman Road, in the Mission area, and downtown. Bylaw has also received a number of complaints about a growing rabbit population on a farm near Garner road, which is apparently causing damage to nearby fruit trees and crops.
- Part of the problem is the feeding of these "wild" rabbits. In some areas, the public are treating them like pets and providing food and water.

Options:

- Monitoring: EBB recommends on-going monitoring of the population, particularly in areas of new expansion.
- Bylaws: Some possible bylaw options include (a) a "no feeding" bylaw, (b) prohibiting the sale of unsterilized rabbits, and/or (c) require property owners to control rabbit populations on private property or clean up areas where rabbits are breeding, such as wood piles. However, bylaws may also be difficult to enforce. TRACS (The Responsible Animal Care Society), has indicated that they are in favour of a bylaw which prohibits the sale of unsterilized rabbits (S. Crossland, personal communication). Petcetera stores in the Lower Mainland have started a recent pilot project where they only sell sterilized rabbits that are provided to them by the local SPCA. If this works it may be expanded to the Kelowna area. Parks has also spoken to the three local pet stores who sell rabbits; they indicated that rabbits are a small part of their business and they seemed amenable to the idea of only selling sterilized rabbits, even if the high cost reduces the demand for these pets.
- Adoption: In Vancouver, and in the City of Vernon, some of the rabbits are being trapped, spayed/neutered and then either sold through pet stores or given for adoption. Some of the costs associated with this option include the cost of sterilization, as well as feeding and housing the rabbits until they are adopted. The local SPCA currently assists with the sterilization and adoption of a small number of unwanted pet rabbits, but indicated that they do not have the resources to accept additional rabbits.
- Relocation: One option would be to trap and relocate the animals to a farm or area where they could be properly managed. This option is favoured by TRACS, who have suggested trapping and separating the male and female rabbits on separate farms on either side of Lake Okanagan. However, relocation of these exotic animals is apparently illegal under the Wildlife Act without a permit. Our consultant has indicated that under the Act, rabbits could only be relocated to a fully enclosed pen within a 10 km radius, or with a proper permit. However, discussions with the BC Ministry of Environment have also suggested that a relocation permit would be difficult to obtain because the Ministry does not want these exotic animals relocated into new areas where they may cause more problems.
- Culling: This tends to be extremely controversial and should probably be a last resort in problem areas. The best time for trapping or culling rabbits would be in winter, when the populations are lower and food is scarce. Culling is being used in areas such as Richmond, primarily on agricultural lands where the rabbits are causing problems. Some of the rabbits in the City of Vernon are being trapped and provided to a farm where they are eventually butchered and sold for meat. Culling is permitted (and generally preferred) by the Ministry of Environment, since these animals are not native.

The Kelowna Parks Division could help with the removal of rabbits from problem-prone locations on City property, but lacks the resources necessary to deal with the bigger problem of rabbit breeding and expansion throughout (and beyond) the City. At some point a larger control program that includes private property owners may be required. Therefore, we recommend that the Regional Board of the Regional District of Central Okanagan consider expanding the RDCO Animal Control mandate to include additional nuisance wildlife and animal complaints such as the rabbit problem. This would allow a more coordinated, regional approach to the problem, as well as helping citizens who don't know who to contact and end up phoning many different agencies and departments in frustration. The RDCO is also better suited to deal with possible relocation options, as this may include lands outside of the City.

INTERNAL CIRCULATION TO:

Bylaw Services

CONSIDERATIONS THAT WERE NOT APPLICABLE TO THIS REPORT:

LEGAL/STATUTORY AUTHORITY:

LEGAL/STATUTORY PROCEDURAL REQUIREMENTS:

EXISTING POLICY:

FINANCIAL/BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS:

PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS:

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS:

EXTERNAL AGENCY/PUBLIC COMMENTS:

COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS:

ALTERNATE RECOMMENDATION:

Submitted by:



Ian Wilson, Urban Forestry Supervisor

Approved for Inclusion:



Cc: David Graham, Director of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Services
Joe Creron, Parks Manager
Al Dixon, Bylaw Enforcement Supervisor