

## Attention editors and reporters

### Reporting about flying-foxes and flying-fox damage around Stanthorpe

We, the signatory groups, write to express our concern at the recent unbalanced and misleading reportage about flying-foxes and flying-fox damage to stone-fruit crops around Stanthorpe. Most stories have presented as facts the angry opinions of a few fruit growers and have failed to present conservation and welfare perspectives. These misleading reports are damaging for the conservation and welfare of flying-foxes, which are critical to the long-term survival of our native forests, particularly eucalypts.

We petition you to report the matter fairly and responsibly, to distinguish between opinion and fact, and to seek the perspective of conservation and welfare experts.

Media reports have been misleading and inaccurate in the following ways:

(1) **The shooting ban is not responsible for the flying-fox damage to fruit crops.** For the past few years, fruit growers have been legally permitted to shoot only 20-30 flying-foxes of any one species per month. This limit was instituted by agreement between state and federal governments when two flying-fox species were listed as threatened by the federal environment department. It means that since 2002 growers have been permitted to shoot on average at most one flying-fox per night (or two if two species are causing damage). This can not provide effective crop protection. In effect, growers have had a phase-out period of many years for (legal) shooting, during which they could adopt non-lethal alternatives.

(2) **There is no such creature as a flying-fox scout.** Growers claim to want to just shoot a few flying-fox 'scouts' as justification for ongoing damage mitigation permits. But the scout is a mythical creature and biologists discount growers' interpretation of flying-fox behaviour. The evidence is that flying-foxes make independent feeding decisions and do not rely on a few bats to lead them to orchards. It would not be difficult for flying-foxes to find orchards as they are a very obvious feature in the landscape.

(3) **The claims of massive damage from flying-foxes are unsubstantiated and wildly exaggerated.** The claims of damage by a few growers seeking compensation and calling for an overturn of the ban on shooting have been accepted as fact. There has been no independent verification of the claims and according to reliable sources, the claims are greatly exaggerated. Damage claimed to be experienced by a few growers should not be extrapolated across the region. Growers seem to be attributing all declines in production to flying-foxes, neglecting the impact of bad weather and bird damage. In the Stanthorpe region, there was reportedly a much lower fruit set than average this year because of bad weather, including "cold weather, combined with up to four hailstorms, a mini cyclone.." (Warwick Daily News, 24 December 2008, page 5).

(4) **Growers have crop protection choices.** Shooting is a very poor method of crop protection, requiring farmers to patrol their orchards all night (and all day against birds) and to shoot large numbers of flying-foxes if the pressure is high. The shooting quota in place since 2002 could not have provided effective crop protection. Netting is the industry standard and best practice, adopted by the majority of growers needing to protect their crops against flying-foxes and birds. There are also sound and light deterrents for growers who cannot afford netting. Compensating those who have failed to invest in effective non-

lethal methods of crop protection would be unfair to the majority of growers who have done so. Groups have supported low-interest loans to assist growers to adopt non-lethal methods of crop protection.

The Queensland government instituted the ban on shooting flying-foxes for very good reasons. The independent Animal Welfare Advisory Committee found that shooting was inhumane, for many flying-foxes are wounded rather than killed in orchards and juvenile flying-foxes die of starvation when their mothers are killed. Flying-foxes are in serious decline, with two of the four mainland species now listed as federally threatened. These declines have serious environmental repercussions, compromising the pollination and seed dispersal of native trees.

Misleading and unbalanced media reports about flying-foxes exacerbate their conservation and welfare problems.

Yours sincerely

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