Better rodent control by better regulation: regulatory incentives and regulator support to improve the humaneness of rodent control

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Abstract

Regulation by government can act as a constraint to improving the humaneness of rodent control, or it can be used to support improvements. How do we make sure it does one and not the other? Societal support and understanding, economic impacts and current knowledge can all 'make or break' progress towards improved rodent control. This is also true in the development of regulations to support this improvement. Moreover, the development of regulations can itself slow progress towards better rodent control. There are many ways that governments, working in a national co-ordination role and as research funders, animal pest managers and regulators, can support a move towards improved rodent control. Progress will depend on finding ways that meet the need to control the impacts of rodents as pests and that are acceptable to citizens and budgets.

Keywords: animal welfare, pest management, policy, regulation, rodenticide, rodents

Introduction

Rodents make up the single largest group of mammals. Several rodents are familiar to us as companions, research subjects, food and for the fur they provide. Rodents are also significant pests for humans, animals and the environment — because they are predators, competitors, agents of ecological change in the forest and the human environment, and a risk for food safety and human health (see Buckle & Smith 1994).

Despite this, rodent pests are as capable of experiencing pain and distress as their domesticated conspecifics and the control methods we use have an impact on their welfare. That impact depends on the animal, the control method, and the way the method is designed, manufactured and used, and the environment it is used in.

So what does improved rodent control look like? The principle of minimising harm applied to rodent control might look like this:

• In the short term, use practices and control methods that are best for animal welfare;
• Plan to reduce the impact of existing methods in the medium term, for instance by introducing modifications to traps or additives in pesticides to hasten the time to unconsciousness;
• Plan to replace less ideal methods over the longer term with new methods that have a lower impact (Littin et al 2004).

With regard to the first point above, there are many ways to improve animal welfare in animal control operations; manufacture, selection, operation, placement, maintenance and use are all important. For instance, good manufacturing practice is important to ensure devices function as they should and baits contain appropriate doses of toxin and remain palatable and toxic after placement; and selection is important so that the most humane method that the situation allows is used. There is a range of humane best practice advice that can be applied to rodent control operations (eg Sharp & Saunders 2005; Pest Management Alliance 2010; and see Warburton et al 2012 [this issue]), and work on how to incorporate a consideration of animal welfare into every stage from planning, through operation to monitoring (eg Humane Vertebrate Pest Control Working Group 2004).

Progress towards improving animal welfare in rodent control operations in these ways can be affected by societal support and understanding, economic impacts and current knowledge. Regulation, too, can be an impediment. However, regulators themselves (or, more broadly, government in general) can help overcome these barriers. Potential roles for government are elaborated below, with a focus on examples from Australia and New Zealand where there is active government support to improve the ‘humaneness’ of animal pest control.