

History of barrier fences in Queensland



Today barrier fences in Queensland consist of the Darling Downs–Moreton Rabbit Board Fence and the Wild Dog Barrier Fence.

The rabbit invasion

The history of the barrier fence is linked to the northward invasion of rabbits in the 1880s. Domestic rabbits were first brought to Australia with the First Fleet and wild rabbits were released into Victoria in 1859. The rabbit spread rapidly at rates of up to 100 km per year.

Rabbits were first reported in south-western Queensland in the 1880s. Their spread was assisted by humans as much as by natural migration. Queensland reacted to the advancing wave of rabbits by introducing the Rabbit Nuisance Bill of 1878 and Act in 1880. Unfortunately, tenders for the construction of a rabbit-proof border fence were not passed until 1886, by which time rabbits were scattered from Wompah in the west to Mungindi in the east.

Rabbit board districts and rabbit fences

To prevent the further spread and devastation of rabbits, a rabbit proof fence started construction in 1886 at a point 25.6 km west of the Warrego River. By 1891, the fence had reached within a few kilometres of Haddon Corner in the far north-east of South Australia and was later extended east to Mungindi, completed in 1903.

Between 1892 and 1905, Queensland was subdivided into nine separate Rabbit Board Districts. Each district erected netted barrier fences to keep the rabbit out.

Barrier and check fences erected from 1886 to 1929 comprised:

- Government border fence 1,171.2 km
- Board fences 9,836.8 km
- Private fences 36,396.0 km

Fences were hastily erected but unfortunately the rabbit had already invaded some districts before the fences were complete. Some of the invaded districts had inadequate financial and technical resources to cope with the problem and went bankrupt. Many other rabbit fences fell into disrepair and ceased being a barrier to rabbits.

In 1930, a Royal Commission recommended the abolition of all existing rabbit boards except three, Leichhardt, Darling Downs and Moreton. All three boards spent a lot of money on the maintenance of a long 'check' fence designed to stop the entry of rabbits and to prevent further northward spread.

In late 1962, the Leichhardt Rabbit Board decided that it would discontinue the maintenance of its check fence and then closed in 1963. The Darling Downs Rabbit Board took over 80 km of the Leichhardt Rabbit Board's fence, which extended the fence to Goombi, west of Chinchilla.

In 1964 the government of the day abolished the Darling Downs and Moreton Rabbit Boards and formed the Darling Downs–Moreton Rabbit Board (DDMRB). Local governments inside the DDMRB area pay a precept to fund the operations of the Board.

In 1997 another 24 km of fence was added, extending the fence to the north and linking the DDMRB fence with the Wild Dog Barrier Fence.

Today the DDMRB looks after 19 local authorities and protects them from incursions by rabbits. They are responsible for the maintenance of the rabbit-proof fence in south-eastern Queensland and the eradication of rabbits inside its boundaries. It employs 14 people full-time and one part-time, has 10 houses for its employees and owns 10 on-road vehicles, three tractors and five quad motorbikes.

At present there, are 555 km of rabbit fence with 184 km of this top-netted to provide a barrier to wild dogs as well.

Wild Dog Barrier Fence

Prior to the Dingo Barrier Fence Scheme, 38 dingo boards were set up around the State and paid out considerable bonuses for the destruction of marsupials, dingoes and foxes. Up until 1930 it was estimated that there were some 32 000 km of dog netting in the State, much of which was constructed as top netting on rabbit fences.

The Dingo Barrier Fence Scheme was first proposed in 1948 after a report by the then Coordinating Board (equivalent to the Land Protection Council). It recommended that a barrier fence be established around the main sheep areas or potential sheep areas of the state. Most landholders desired the establishment of such a fence as a means of managing the impacts of dingoes and wild dogs.

Landholders along the proposed line were informed that wire netting would be landed on their properties free of cost if they established the barrier fence. The fence was built to certain specifications and a contribution was provided annually for repairs and maintenance. Six inspectors stationed in western Queensland supervised the construction and maintenance of the fence.

Up until the early 1970s, most of the barrier fence was maintained. However, regular instances occurred where landholders were not maintaining the fence. Some reasons given were:

- poor economic conditions
- change in land use from sheep to cattle
- damage by flood and fire
- some older sections required rebuilding
- the successful use of 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate) baiting for wild dog control.

In 1975, the estimated cost of bringing the whole of the original barrier fence up to dog-proof condition was \$915 000. There was much opposition to these original proposals and they were eventually dropped. A shortened fence proposal was then canvassed amongst local governments and grazier organisations. The total length to be reconstructed and maintained was 2125 km.

In 1982, the state government decided to implement a program through the board to upgrade parts of the existing fence and realign the fence to exclude previously protected areas in central-western Queensland and north-western Queensland.

In addition to the main barrier fence, a number of check fences were reconstructed and renewed in the southern Darling Downs area. The barrier fence would now provide protection from wild dogs and dingoes only to central southern Queensland.

The Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries today administers the Wild Dog Barrier Fence. It is approximately 2500 km long and has been totally reconstructed. The Wild Dog Barrier Fence protects 26.5 million hectares of sheep and cattle grazing country.

Travel along the barrier fence is not permitted without prior authority from the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries and each individual landholder.



Staff and funding

Wild Dog Barrier Fence staff consists of 23 employees:

- a project officer who oversees all components of the Wild Dog Barrier Fence
- two inspectors who supervise patrolmen on their sections of the fence
- two two-person flying gangs (for immediate repairs of flood/fire damage and renewing aging or deteriorating sections)
- eight two-person patrols, for ongoing maintenance.

Each two-person crew has a section of fence to maintain of approximately 300 km, which is patrolled once a week.

Fully equipped depots are situated at Quilpie and Roma.

Today, the Wild Dog Barrier Fence is funded through contributions from

- State government (50%)
- Local government via precept collections (50%)

Fence construction

The barrier fence is constructed using wooden posts, strainers, star pickets, wire and different types and sizes of netting. The fence line is cleared on both sides to a width of 5 m.

Floodway fences are constructed using heavy cable. The fence stands 1.8 m high with the netting at ground level laid a further 1.5 m along the ground. Wire netting is secured at ground level using straight timber logs placed on the downstream side of the fence.

Grids are of similar construction as Department of Main Roads grids.



Further information

Further information is available from animal control/environmental staff at your local government or, if your council does not have animal control staff, from your local Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries Land Protection Officer: contact details available through 13 25 23.