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Australian Academy of Science submission on the management of feral horses in the Australian Alps

The Australian Academy of Science supports the proposed amendments to the *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan 2021*, which includes transparency in the estimation of feral horse numbers and authorises the National Parks and Wildlife Service to meet the ecological and cultural needs of Kosciuszko National Park as informed by scientific research.

Reducing the feral horse population in protected areas

The Academy supports and reinforces the use of evidence-based practices and protection actions to best protect and preserve the unique ecosystems and cultural sites in the Australian Alpine Region.

Kosciuszko National Park contains the habitat of several critically endangered species, including the Northern and Southern Corroboree frog found in sphagnum bogs, the Mountain Pygmy possum, Alpine crayfish, the Terrestrial Leek Orchid (*Prasophyllum innubum*) and the Blue-tongued Greenhood (*Pterostylis orephila*). These species are subject to the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 (NSW)* and the *'Savings our Species Program' (2019)* initiative. The area is also home to 280 culturally significant sites of importance to Aboriginal communities as well as to our understanding of the area's Aboriginal culture.

The feral horse population is placing considerable strain on this habitat, with other pressures such as bushfires and climate change. Research demonstrates that over-grazing by hard-hooved animals causes substantial damage to plant biomass and soil structures, and feral horses are the largest contributor to this damage. This damage leads to a reduction of native vegetation species and encourages exotic plant species to establish, causing further native species and habitat vulnerability.

To address this damage, the *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan* and *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018 (NSW)* requires a reduction of the feral horse population to 3,000 by 30 June 2027, from a current estimation of 18,814.

RSPCA Australia acknowledges that in certain circumstances, it is necessary to manage populations of feral animals to counter adverse impacts on the environment. These measures must be humane, target-specific, and effective. Inaction or current measures on the feral horse population present potential cruelty and suffering of other species and fragile ecosystems due to overpopulation, creating a lack of resources and harsh environmental conditions.

The Academy supports proposed amendments, including re-authorising aerial shooting as a humane control mechanism in addition to existing methods such as ground shooting, trapping, and rehoming. Current methods will not be adequate to reduce the population numbers within the required limits by 2027. The additional control measure will help cushion the effects of feral horses on the Australian Alp landscape and is necessary to protect the ecological, social, cultural, and heritage values of Kosciuszko National Park.

Scientifically informed practice

The Academy welcomes the use of scientific evidence to inform management actions in the Kosciuszko National Park and the transparency regarding this evidence.

However, it must be noted that under current legislation, there remains no formal requirement for National Parks and Wildlife Service to seek scientific advice for the management of feral horse populations. The *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018 (NSW)* should be repealed, and a Scientific Advisory Panel formally reinstated.

Science and scientific advice are central to the management of National Parks and wildlife controls. Preventative and protective actions to prolong the health and resilience of our native flora and fauna in our national parks must be based on evidence and understanding.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Mr Chris Anderson, Director Science Policy at Chris.Anderson@science.org.au.