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Animal Welfare Guidelines – Code of Practice for the Capture, Handling, Transport and Slaughter of Brush-tail Possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*)

Approved under Section 44B of the *Animal Welfare Act 1993* by the then Minister for Primary Industries and Water – October 2008.

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ANIMAL WELFARE GUIDELINES

Animal welfare considerations are becoming increasingly important in the keeping and farming of animals, both in Australia and internationally. Practices which may have once been deemed acceptable or justifiable, are now being reassessed in the light of new knowledge and changing attitudes. High standards of welfare are not only important legally and ethically, but also have direct economic benefits and are becoming increasingly necessary for continued market access.

Tasmania's Animal Welfare Guidelines are approved by the Minister for Primary Industries and Water, after consultation with the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, in accordance with section 44B of the *Animal Welfare Act 1993*.

Under the Animal Welfare Act, Animal Welfare Guidelines are to include guidelines for the education and guidance of persons involved in the care and management of animals. Animal Welfare Guidelines are therefore advisory in nature. They are intended to help people involved in the care and management of animals adopt high standards of husbandry. In addition, they may be used by the Courts as a yardstick to assess husbandry and management

The Animal Welfare Guidelines may be based on the *Australian Model Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Animals*, or the *Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines*, endorsed by the Primary Industries Ministerial Council (PIMC). Alternatively, where there is no suitable national model, Animal Welfare Guidelines may be developed in Tasmania, in consultation with industry and animal welfare groups.

Animal Welfare Guidelines will be revised to take into account changes in animal management practices and in knowledge of animal welfare.

The Code of Practice for the Capture, Handling, Transport and Slaughter of Brush-tail Possums was developed in Tasmania by the animal Welfare Advisory Committee.

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1. Introduction and Scope of this Code

Codes of practice for the welfare of animals are developed through a consultative process involving industry (animal user groups), Government and animal welfare organisations. Codes of practice provide guidance for people who have a duty of care for the welfare of animals. They also provide guidelines for the courts in determining cruelty cases.

In Tasmania, codes of practice may be approved by the Minister as Animal Welfare Guidelines under the Animal Welfare Act 1993, on the recommendation of the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee. The Animal Welfare Act is administered by the Department of Primary Industries and Water.

Under the Animal Welfare Act, a person with the care or charge of an animal has a legal duty of care for the welfare of the animal.

This code of practice is intended as a guide for persons responsible for the live trapping, transport to game meat processing works, holding and slaughter of Brush-tail possums.

Brush-tail possums may also be harvested commercially for skins and/or meat by shooting, an activity beyond the scope of this code.

This code is based on current knowledge and experience on the live trapping of Brush-tail Possum and technology available at the time of publication. The code will be revised as required, to take into account advances in technology and understanding of physiology and behaviour, as well as expectations of the industry and the general community.

2. Brush-tail Possums

Brush-tail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) are native marsupials whose population has markedly increased in Tasmania due to land development and the planting of crops and pasture. The growing of introduced plants for commercial and home gardening purposes has also provided an abundance of food which is readily acceptable to Brush-tail possums.

Brush-tail possums are recognised as adaptive animals, not as easily stressed as many other native species. However, to minimise stress, unnecessary handling of possums should be avoided. Brush-tail possums are nocturnal animals and become quite active after dark - for this reason they must not be handled during this time.

Currently, the population of Brush-tail possums is at a high level. In some areas Brush-tail possums damage crops. Commercial harvesting is seen as one management tool.

In order to meet certain trade requirements for 'skin on' possums, the carcasses must be processed immediately after slaughter. It is therefore necessary to trap the possums in cage traps and transport them live in transport boxes to the game meat processing works for slaughter and processing.

3. Legislative Control

Brush-tail possums are protected in Tasmania under the *Wildlife Regulations 1999*. The hunting or capture of this species cannot be undertaken without a permit from the Nature Conservation Branch of the Department of Primary Industries and Water.

Commercial harvesting of Brush-tail possums is only allowed on land used for primary production, with the approval of the landholder and under Nature conservation Branch permit.

In the case of the harvesting of Brush-tail possums for meat, their capture, handling, transport and slaughter must be carried out by accredited operators in accordance with the provisions of the Meat Hygiene Act 1986 in respect of domestic product and the Export Control Act 1982 in respect of export product.

The Commonwealth controls the overseas trade in native wildlife through the Wildlife Protection (Regulation of Exports and Imports) Act 1982. Under this legislation, the commercial export of species is restricted to specimens taken under an approved management program or derived from approved captive breeding operations. This is to ensure that the survival of the species is not threatened. The controlling authority is Environment Australia (EA), within the Federal Environment portfolio.

Products derived from commercially harvested Brush-tail possum may only be exported from Australia in accordance with a permit issued by EA. Such a permit may only be issued if the Brush-tail possum are taken in accordance with the currently approved Tasmanian Brush-tail Possum Management Program.

The management program also provides that permission may be given to particular permit holders to take Brush-tail possum by live trapping using cages, and that, where this is the case, live trapping and transport must be conducted in accordance with this Code of Practice.

4. Cage traps

Cage traps should be no smaller than 60 cm long by 30 cm wide by 30 cm high. Cage traps should be constructed using weld mesh or similar material which is capable of securely confining Brush-tail possums and minimising the risk of injury.

The mesh size must be no greater than 25x50 mm, to prevent facial and other injuries in possums and in non-target species such as Bettongs (*Bettongia gaimardii*).

The door may be either sliding or swing type.

All traps must be regularly cleaned and maintained and checked for broken wires, sharp edges and protrusions that may cause injuries.

In using cage traps to capture Brush-tail possums users must make every reasonable effort to ensure that the possums have protection from the elements – particularly direct sunlight, injury, pain or stress and protection from domestic dogs and native predators.

Cage traps should where possible be set under shelter. In areas subject to extreme frost, ice and snow the traps should be elevated. In areas populated by Bettongs the traps should be elevated and set on stumps or logs etc.

The Wildlife Regulations require that cage traps be inspected at least once every 24 hours. Cage traps must be inspected as early as practical each morning. Cage traps must not be inspected at night.

5. Non target animals

All animals trapped, other than Brush-tail possums, must be released. Non target animals should be examined and any wounds treated with an antiseptic prior to immediate release. Animals should be released in forest areas at or near the trapping site.

Juvenile possums or possums which are otherwise unsuitable for processing shall be released in trees at or near the trapping site. Trapped possums must be examined for pouch young. In order to minimise handling, this examination should be performed at the processing works.

If pouch young are likely to survive, they may be taken to a wildlife carer. The alternative is humane destruction. As a guide, naked (unfurred) young will not survive and must be humanely killed and finely furred young may survive under expert care.

In the case of naked young, killing by decapitation with a sharp instrument is recommended. In larger young, a heavy blow should be used to destroy the brain, followed by bleeding out.

Trappers must not use an electric prod or electronic device or any sharpened implement for the purpose of removing any animal from a trap.

6. Transport Boxes

Possoms must be transported in transport boxes only.

In this code “transport box” means a box that is specially constructed to hold/confine Brush-tail possums during transport from trapping sites to the game meat processing works.

Transport boxes should be no smaller than 50cm long by 25cm wide by 25cm high and must not be used for more than 1 Brush-tail possum at a time. A relatively small sized transport box is said to mimic the natural nest site, offering security. In practice it has been observed that the majority of possums in transport boxes appear to sleep.

Possoms transported in traps have been seen to become distressed, even if the traps are covered.

Transport boxes are to be ventilated and constructed from a material that restricts light and provides insulation from extremes in temperature, noise and disturbance and protection from injury. The box shall have a sliding door and a base constructed of mesh or other similarly perforated material to allow the passage of urine and faeces while not allowing entrapment and injury to feet or tail.

Possoms must not be transported other than in transport boxes constructed in accordance with this code. The covering of transport boxes in transit is not necessary. If a cover is used, it must provide good ventilation, even when the vehicle is stationary.

Transport boxes must be regularly maintained and cleaned and checked for sharp edges and protrusions.

7. Transport

During transit on public roads Brush-tail possums may be subject to stress caused by:

- a) deprivation of food and water,
- b) changes in climatic conditions,
- c) unfamiliar noise, surroundings and sensations,
- d) exposure to bright light.

The transport driver, as the person legally responsible for the welfare of possums being transported, must take all reasonable precautions to minimise these stresses.

Possoms must be transported to the processing plant immediately following clearing of the traps and loading of the transport boxes.

Periods for transporting possum from trapping sites to the processing works must be kept to a minimum within the confines of traffic laws. The total transport time should not exceed 4 hours on the open road.

Transport boxes must be placed on transport vehicles in such a way that adequate ventilation is provided to each transport box.

Transport boxes should be securely tied down or stowed to prevent any movement.

An inspection of the transport boxes is to be carried out not later than 30 minutes after the start of the journey. Any possum found to be injured or stressed should be given immediate attention.

8. Slaughter of Brush-tail Possum

Possoms should be slaughtered before the first sunset following capture.

Possoms are not to be slaughtered between sunset and sunrise. Every reasonable effort must be made to avoid the need to hold possums overnight.

Where possums are held overnight, they must be kept in transport boxes inside the meat processing works. The transport boxes must be stowed such that each possum receives adequate ventilation. Possoms held overnight must be provided with moist fruit such as apple. Possoms held overnight must be slaughtered as soon as possible the next day.

Possoms may be held no longer than 48 hours after capture.

Processors must provide a written report each month to the Manager, Animal Health and Welfare Branch of the Department of Primary Industries and Water, detailing the number of instances that possums were held overnight during the preceding month.

The method of killing Brush-tail possums should be effective and cause sudden and painless death. It is important that possums are handled quietly beforehand to ensure they are not distressed or alarmed.

Brush-tail possums must be stunned whilst still in the transport box, using either an approved electrical stunning device or a captive bolt pistol held against the skull.

Figure 1 shows the recommended position for the captive-bolt pistol. To ensure rapid death the possum must be bled-out immediately after collapse. Females must be examined for pouch-young as soon as possible after bleeding.

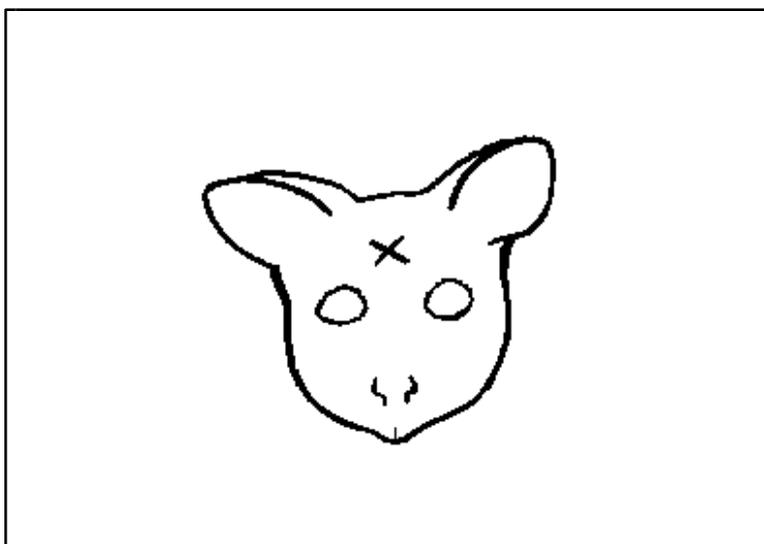


Figure 1. Recommended position for captive bolt pistol

The captive-bolt pistol must be no smaller than .22 caliber. The captive bolt pistol user is to ensure that the most appropriate load charge is used for Brush-tail possums.

Where electrical stunning is used,

- the electrodes should be spaced approximately 25-30 mm apart
- voltage should be set at a minimum of 300V
- duration of stun should be a minimum of 3 seconds
- a captive-bolt pistol must be available in reserve