

THE PRESS

Concern over 1080 groundless

The use by the Department of Conservation and others of 1080 poison to control pests across large tracts of land has for years been the subject of hot controversy. Critics have claimed that the poison has been used too indiscriminately, without regard to the welfare of humans or of animals we wish to protect. They have warned of irreparable damage to wildlife and ecosystems.

It is right that we should be vigilant about the possibility of causing harm, particularly where it might be done inadvertently as an unintended consequence of trying to do good. The 20th century is littered with examples of the use of pesticides – DDT is a prime example – where the damage in many places outweighed any benefit that it was intended to bring about. Sometimes that damage has not emerged for many years.

Heeding concerns about the use of 1080, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Dr Jan Wright, in 2010 produced a report on an investigation, *Evaluating the use of 1080: Predators, poisons and silent forests*. Wright declined to impose a moratorium on the use of 1080, as she had been asked to do. She found instead that 1080 was necessary to control pests but that rules governing its use should be tightened and that it should be closely monitored.

In June this year, the Environmental Protection Agency produced an update. It, too, acknowledged that there could be room for improvement in the use of 1080. However, the agency also ringingly endorsed it. The poison should not be viewed as “a necessary evil”, it said. Rather, “we are lucky to

have it”. It came to this conclusion because 1080, delivered by airdrops, is the only way to control pests in the dense bush that covers much of the country in which it is used. Without it, there would be a population explosion among rats, stoats and other such pests and an ensuing holocaust among native species. The “silent forest” would then not be a myth of fevered anti-1080 imaginations but a reality.

A five-yearly review by the EPA, just released, provides further support for the continued use of the poison. It shows how better controls have improved communication with communities. It also shows how fears about 1080's use are groundless. The poison has, for instance, been found in only 2 per cent of more than 500 water samples taken, it has never been found in concentrations that would threaten the health of humans and it has never been found in drinking water.

The review is timely because the coming summer is expected to be what is known as a “mast” year in which native beech flowers prolifically. That is expected to produce an abundance of seeds leading in turn to a rapid increase in the population of predatory rodents. According to Wright, DOC and other agencies will need to react vigorously to meet the threat and she has welcomed moves to cut the red tape associated with aerial drops.

The reports on 1080 over the last five years have been rigorous and thorough. They leave no room for doubt about the safety of the poison. Objections to its use can now come only from fringe obsessives whom no amount of evidence will persuade.