

LETTERS

to the editor

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Letters must be no longer than 250 words. Letters will be edited.

Proof lacking

NICK Mooney's defence of the Tasmanian fox program (S&L Opinion, September 25), established in no small part due to his and his brother's efforts, is that this was a prudent response to a real risk.

However, is it ever prudent for a government to claim that a risk exists and spend public money, based only on rumour or what someone reckons?

As the back stories to the inception of the 13-year fox program that began in 2001 are found to be anecdotal, baseless and no longer defended by even those who once promoted them as the truth, one has to question why it is hard for them not to see that this is a flashing red light and not good risk management.

The Tasmanian fox program was based on anecdotal and opportunistically acquired "evidence" that was subjectively assessed by the very originators of the program to support their own opinions.

Perhaps it is unremarkable that the same people now appear to be affronted that a group of scientists – some from the European Union – reviewing

the eradication program by experimentation and empirical analysis came up with a very different conclusion.

What our panel of scientists and technicians did was to send the official Tasmanian fox program's data and analysis to more than 30 independent and PhD-qualified scientists and then on to editors at six different journals for independent review.

Mr Mooney may well have been happier if his opinion and approval had been sought but this is not how science works.

Someone's opinion is worthless compared to data and validating analysis.

Dr Sarre once claimed foxes

were widespread in Tasmania based on 56 supposed positive scats.

He has indeed written a letter claiming that in his opinion our study got it wrong and he was right all along.

As I mentioned, an opinion alone is pretty worthless in science and a letter devoid of data presents nothing to back up the claims.

But Mr Mooney seems happy enough with this.

In this letter they make an elementary mistake.

But they focus on a test we did not claim to assess; we assessed another to the one they claim we did.



And the reason for this is quite revealing: they refused to share their data on the test we had asked for so that we could assess it.

Just how are we expected to reconcile Dr Sarre's own public admission that his fox test has an error rate of some four in 1000 – perhaps 40 of 56 scats he claimed to be positive for fox – with the implied suggestion that this does not affect his prior claim that foxes are widespread in Tasmania?

We'd like more than an opinion when answering that question.

A live fox found in Tasmania would do very nicely.

– DAVID OBENDORF (PhD),
West Hobart, Tas