

# Toad fight croaks

## Funding shortfall shelves eradication research

### Suellen Hinde

PROMISING Queensland research into how to eradicate the cane toad has been shelved because of a lack of funding.

Queensland Institute of Molecular Bioscience Professor Rob Capon and his team spent two years researching a way to rid Australia of the cane toad that is biodegradable, non-toxic and species-specific.

But now that they think they have found a solution there is no more funding to continue the work.

"I let the last member of my cane toad research team go in February," Dr Capon said.

The Institute of Molecular Bioscience discovered that by exposing toad tadpoles to a toad pheromone, it frightened the creatures and caused them to undergo "premature metamor-



**SUPPORT CALL:**  
Prof Rob Capon

phosis", decreasing their chances of survival.

The cane toad is not a declared pest in Queensland but under federal biodiversity laws it is regarded as a key threat to Australian biodiversity. Prof Capon said the toad had not been declared a pest because, unlike other pests, it was an animal species that did not have an impact on agriculture.

"Because it does not have a commercial impact, it is not considered in the same league as some other pests," he said.

"But it has had a massive effect on

native fauna. However, there are not the interest groups out there lobbying to protect our native species like goannas and freshwater crocodiles from the threat of cane toads."

The northern quoll, monitor lizards, freshwater crocodiles and some snake species have been severely affected because they eat toads.

Dr Capon and his team began their research with a \$1 million grant in 2006 from the Beattie Government to find new ways to control cane toads.

"We looked at the chemical ecology of the cane toad in what makes it so effective," he said. "Previously, scientists have used insect pheromones to control insects on crops so we thought with their prolific breeding cycle there might be a way to stop the cane toad with a sex pheromone.

"We found they had an alarm pheromone.

"When you crush up a cane toad tadpole and put a drop into water where other toadlets are, they get scared and run away and it has an effect where the scared cane toadlets don't mature, and die."

Dr Capon has had several calls from co-operative research centres around Australia interested in his research.

"In the first two years we looked at options and now what we need to do is to choose the most promising of these options, of which the alarm pheromone is one, so we need a further \$1 million over two years," he said.

About 100 cane toads were introduced from Hawaii to Gordonvale, north Queensland, in 1935 to control the greyback cane beetle.

Cane toads now have spread to occupy more than 500,000sq km of Australia.