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# Italy declares war on rampant rodents ravaging riverbanks

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Rome: Their chubby cheeks lend them an appealing look, but Italy has declared war on its growing population of coypu, castor-like animals that have thrived since escaping from fur farms decades ago.

Farmers blame the large rodents for wreaking havoc by digging their dens in river banks and levees, causing flooding that damages crops.



Regions across the country are rolling out eradication programs, encouraging hunters to shoot the animals and recruiting volunteers to set traps.

Lombardy, which includes Milan, has committed €200,000 (\$308,000) to the campaign against the coypu this year, while neighbouring Veneto, including Venice, has set aside €100,000.

The creatures are a particular problem in the rice paddy fields of the Po Valley in northern Italy, burrowing into banks and compromising water channels. They have adapted well to different habitats and can often be seen in the middle of Rome, nibbling on sedges on the banks of the Tiber.

They breed rapidly, with a female capable of giving birth to up to a dozen young at a time. No one knows how many coypu there are living wild in Italy but in the region of Emilia-Romagna alone, there are believed to be around a million, while Lombardy has a population of around 1.3 million, with the regional government calling for 300,000 to be culled each year.

"The animal's habit of digging tunnels and dens compromises dams and embankments as well as irrigation channels," the Veneto regional government warned.

They are also voracious eaters of crops. "The coypu is a glutton for maize," said Martino Cerantola, the president of the Veneto branch of Coldiretti, a farmers' association.

The funds will be used to buy metal traps and to reimburse hunters and farmers for the shotgun shells and rifle bullets they use.

Coypu are native to South America, where they are eaten by alligators, large snakes and eagles. A lack of such predators in Europe has contributed to their rapid population growth.

They were introduced to Italy in fur farms in the Twenties, but many were released when fur demand crashed.

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The Daily Telegraph