Classrooms zero in on pests

Students at four Mahurangi primary schools will take part in a $180,000 project, which aims to mobilise communities to eradicate pests in Rodney.

The Forest Bridge Trust, in partnership with the University of Auckland, received a $150,000 grant from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) in November.

The trust is developing a community education programme called CatchIT Communities, which involves students using apps and computer programmes to map the progress of their own pest control projects.

The course was trialled at schools in Kaipara Flats, Tauhoa and Tomarata last year. Students were given trapping equipment to use at home and the effectiveness of different baits, traps, and locations was analysed in the classroom.

The University of Auckland is developing a computer programme, which will allow students to easily present trapping results in graphs and maps. The software will be used in tandem with a new app developed by the Department of Conservation which lets trappers log data in the field, such as what pest was caught and where.

The programme will be trialled at schools in Warkworth, Matakana, Leigh and Ahuroa. Trust advisor Liz Maire says the support for the project has been heartening.

"It's gone from a little idea to something that's growing rapidly," Liz says. "The ability to get accurate statistics will be a hugely valuable resource for achieving the trust's goal of creating a pest-free corridor from coast to coast in Rodney.

"Using these computer programmes we will be able to help the students learn things like what the best bait is for rats or the best place to put a possum trap. Eventually we could create a nationwide database with good stats on how many pests are being trapped and where, so we could track conservation gains across the country."

The trust has also received $25,000 from the Rodney Environmental Natural Heritage Funding and $5000 from Rodney Local Board to roll out the programme.

The University of Auckland software will be finished by July and the intention is to make it free for trapping groups to use.

The trust is also holding pest control workshops early this year to get communities involved in eradicating pests on their land.

"We will have trapping experts who will give advice to help people control pests and we will have traps to give away."

Mahurangi College is also getting on board with the project.

"We are talking with the technology department about having students build rat traps as part of their course."

Another side of the trust's strategy involves working with landowners to fence off forest and conduct pest control on their land. It received $24,700 from the Rodney Environmental Natural Heritage Fund to fence off Significant Ecological Areas and riparian bush in the Hoteo catchment.