

# **Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales - 2024**



**Animal Care Australia submission**

**Approved: 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2024**

**“Animal welfare is animal care”**

# Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



## CONTENTS

**ACA Background..... 2**

**Opening statement ..... 2**

**Definitions of cats ..... 3**

**Terms of Reference. .... 4**

    (a) the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings ..... 4

    (b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers ..... 5

    (c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions ..... 6

    d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership ..... 8

    (e) implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies ..... 10

    (f) the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs ..... 11

    (h) the outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other states or territories ..... 17

    (i) options for reducing the feral cat population..... 18

    General comment..... 21

# Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



## ACA Background

Animal Care Australia Inc. (ACA) represents the interests of all hobbyist and pet animal keepers nationally. Our members are comprised of most major animal keeping representative bodies including those representing dogs, cats, birds, horses, small mammals, reptiles, fish and exhibited animals. Some individual members also work in the rescue, care, and rehabilitation sectors.

## Opening statement

Animal Care Australia would like to thank the Animal Welfare Committee for providing us with the opportunity to provide feedback for this Inquiry and welcome the opportunity to provide testimony at the Inquiry.

As a nationally recognised animal welfare organisation, Animal Care Australia continues to support responsible pet ownership. Cats are the second most popular pet in Australian households with over 33% of owners having a cat.<sup>1</sup>

How cats are owned and managed is becoming more and more vital as our cities grow, our backyards diminish, the existence of our native wildlife continues to be threatened and free-roaming cats are considered by the broader community to be a key contributing factor to that threat and are a noisy neighbour (when cats are 'in heat') that should be kept within their own homes.

Cat management has taken a whole new perspective for Local Councils and pet owners alike. Sharing your life and home with a cat (or three) is a major responsibility and Animal Care Australia strongly believes education is the most important and cost-effective measure any government can pursue as a part of any cat management strategy.

In responding to the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry, Animal Care Australia will highlight and recommend measures for where education and in certain circumstances, financial assistance can provide the greatest higher animal welfare benefits.

To be clear: when referring to containment Animal Care Australia supports the cat being contained to the owner's property and is not stating this means permanent incarceration to indoor living.

Animal Care Australia also acknowledges the need necessity for rodent control to allow 'barn cats' to be able to roam more broadly around the general homestead and buildings – but this should not include or encourage broader free-roaming beyond that property.

**Important note:** This Inquiry is supposed to be about cat management and yet half of the Terms of Reference are specifically focused on cat containment?

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<sup>1</sup> Cat ownership: <https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/>

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



Animal Care Australia questions the necessity for such a focus? Is this in response to existing Bills yet to be debated by Parliament?

**It is vital to understand that Cat Management and Cat Containment are separate things.**

**Cat containment makes up a small aspect of cat management.**

### Definitions of cats

Animal Care Australia has responded and contributed to several reviews, proposed legislation amendments and cat management/containment strategies across the country. These include federal, state, and local government. What is clear to us is the uncoordinated use of different definitions of cats with some striking misnomers ‘thrown in for good will.’ It is vital that any cat management strategy not only sets out to define the varying cat populations it is intending to include but that a nationally recognised and agreed set of definitions can be adopted.

Animal Care Australia recognises and recommends the following definitions:

**Domestic (pet) cats** have some form of dependence on humans, either directly or indirectly. They can be classified into three subcategories based on their relationship with humans. These subcategories are:

**Owned** — these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable although sociability varies.

**Semi-owned** — these cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider themselves owners. They are of varying sociability, with many socialised to humans, and may be associated with one or more households.

**A subset of these** include ‘**working cats.**’ These are farm/barn cats and warehouse cats. Working cats provide a valuable service to landholders and may or may not be cared for by an owner.

**Unowned** — often also referred to as ‘stray cats’ - these cats are indirectly dependent on humans, with some having casual and temporary human interaction. They are of varied sociability, including some being unsocialised, and may live in groups (e.g., at rubbish tips, shopping centres and other urban environments where they can scavenge for food).

**Feral cats** are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and reproduce in the wild.

Definitions matter, as does the environment that the cat lives in, and this varied population of cats needs to be considered separately for each of the Terms of Reference.

A clear distinction needs to be made about the treatment of the main categories of cats – domestic (pet) cats, stray cats, and feral cats. Strategies dealing with stray cats will assist in reducing the feral

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



cat problem as stray cats are most likely to have been a pet cat at some point and socialised with people. The longer these cats remain as strays increases the potential for them to fall into the feral category as their contact with humans decreases.

### Terms of Reference.

The Animal Welfare Committee inquire into and report on the management of cat populations in New South Wales, and in particular:

- (a) the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings
- (b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers
- (c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions
- (d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives
- (e) implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies
- (f) the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs
- (g) the impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system
- (h) the outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories
- (i) options for reducing the feral cat population
- (j) any other related matters.

#### **(a) the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings**

The impact of cats, both domestic and feral, on native wildlife in urban and regional areas is reported to be significant. Research shows that cats kill millions of native animals annually, with severe consequences for endangered species.

In metropolitan areas, free-roaming domestic cats contribute to the decline of urban bird, reptile, and small mammal populations. Even well-fed pets retain strong hunting instincts, mainly as a means of expending energy or playing, adding pressure to local ecosystems and already vulnerable native species.

It cannot be denied that cats hunting for their own food will be preying on native wildlife. However, many free ranging cats on agricultural land are serving the landholders a valuable service – often called barn cats, these semi-owned cats will roam farms and keep rodents, rabbits, and other pests under control in a free and organic way. While it is true that they will also remove native rodent

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



populations from their environment, they have an economic value to the farmers, that needs to be considered before putting limitations on these working cats.

In a similar way, cats are often welcome in urban warehouses, where their mere presence is a deterrent to rodents that would otherwise infect our food supplies. These cats have an inherent value, and concessions need to be considered to permit these cats to continue to do their jobs, while ensuring that someone is responsible for their welfare.

In more remote or semi-urban regions, feral cats pose an even greater threat to native wildlife. They are known to hunt native animals. Feral cats are difficult to control because they are highly adaptable and avoid traps and bait when food is abundant.

The challenge is how to manage a feral cat population in existence with native wildlife. The solution of eradicating the feral cat population is controversial and does not sit easy with many pet cat owners or sympathetic animal enthusiasts.

Conversely, the continued killing and eradication of threatened species by cats does not sit easy with conservationists and native animal enthusiasts.

The CSIRO reports that the unweighted average number of prey items brought home by roaming, hunting domestic (pet) cats across 47 studies globally was 38.9 prey items per cat per year. The unweighted average value for the subset of 12 Australian studies was 28.1 items per cat per year.<sup>2</sup>

This needs more research, in situation-specific studies, as it is equally true that metropolitan and urban areas have sustained fox populations. There is no research that distinctly supports cats as being the sole contributor to local native wildlife declines.

Every different person will have their own opinion and the fact is that the purely feral cats living in rural, bushland, regional, national, national forest type locations cannot be easily trapped and humanely euthanised, as much as we wish that they could, and despite the claims of most current methods as being 'humane.'

### **(b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers**

Effectiveness can be measured in various ways:

- the effectiveness of simply containing a cat?
- the effectiveness of preserving wildlife?
- the effectiveness of improving cat welfare?
- The effect of pest control?

Animal Care Australia considers 'effectiveness' to be the combined result of improving environmental outcomes (including protection of native wildlife) alongside good welfare outcome for cats.

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<sup>2</sup> [CSIRO studies](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



Policies that increase cat abandonment, say, because community cats are mandated to be owned by an individual, will create more new welfare issues than they solve. Policies need to be implemented at a local level, rather than statewide to be appropriate for the community as well as the specific population of cats.

That said, cat containment policies can be effective, mostly to the welfare benefits of the cats, however successful widespread implementation relies on education of cat owners of those benefits and incentives or subsidies for cat containment.

Cat containment policies aimed at limiting cats to indoor environments or secure outdoor enclosures have shown effectiveness in reducing the impact of incidents involving domestic cats.

It should be noted Animal Care Australia supports the use of both indoor AND secure outdoor containment. For the purpose of cats living within unit complexes, this could include enclosing the outdoor balcony and taking cats for a walk on a lead (and harness) in the same manner as dog owners.

Of course, cats kept indoors can cause little to no harm to native wildlife, when left unattended outside, other than the occasional 'straggler' into the cats' environment.

In the ACT, where 24/7 containment policies are common, there has been a notable benefit of improving the health and safety of cats, leading to lower injury rates, fewer accidents, and this will result in longer life spans for contained cats.

The predominant barrier to such policies is the cost to the owner and quite often the amount of re-tape required by some local councils as they see the construction of outdoor enclosures as structures requiring DA approval. This must be rectified. Mindsets of Councils must be re-set in order to make the implementation of containment policies easier.

Councils must allow cats to be outside if under the strict controlled supervision of their owner which would include a pet carrier, lead, and harness, etc.

### **(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions**

There are many benefits and great welfare outcome for cats under contained conditions.

#### **- Improved Cat Health and Safety:**

Cats who are contained 100% of the time and are not allowed to free-roam off property will not suffer injuries from external factors such as car accidents, fights with other animals and predators and reduced likelihood of coming into contact with infectious diseases.

#### **- Reduced Risk of Parasite and Disease Transmission**

Free-roaming cats are more likely to encounter and spread diseases and parasites, such as toxoplasmosis, Panleukopenia, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV),

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis and Ringworm. Containment helps minimize these risks, contributing to better public health and reducing the spread of zoonotic disease.

### - Lowered Veterinary Costs:

Contained cats tend to have lower medical expenses due to fewer injuries, reduced disease exposure, and less wear and tear on their bodies from outdoor hazards. This can lead to fewer vet visits and lower costs for pet owners and reducing stress triggers on cats.

### - Reduced Nuisance to Neighbours:

Roaming cats can sometimes cause conflicts with neighbours by digging in gardens, defecating in yards, or hunting local birds. Containment can prevent these issues, contributing to more harmonious neighbourhood relations.

## What an indoor cat misses out on:

EDUCATION & INFORMATION

- ◆ Being hit by a car
- ◆ Being trapped or poisoned
- ◆ Becoming the victim of another animal (eg: dogs)
- ◆ Complaints & threats from neighbours
- ◆ Being stolen
- ◆ Being injured
- ◆ Killing native wildlife
- ◆ Other territorial cats
- ◆ Catching transmissible diseases
- ◆ Infestations of fleas/ticks/parasites



### ACA supports responsible cat ownership

"Animal welfare is animal care"  
Animal welfare by the experts — those who keep, care for and breed animals  
[www.animalcareaustralia.org.au](http://www.animalcareaustralia.org.au)

Cats that have always been indoor cats have no issue with living indoors, however cats that have been allowed to enjoy the outdoors can take some time to adapt to full time containment.

Animal Care Australia supports pet cats being contained to their owner's property, just like all other domesticated animals are required to be. We do not support more restrictive policies such as Indoor only, or restricting of cats that are leash trained to not be permitted in community spaces.



## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



All pets deserve to have a good life, and changing these conditions overnight can cause stress, and create behavioural problems. Many cat owners do not understand cat behaviour well at all, and these struggles can lead to an increase in pound surrenders, and pet abandonment. Government should never make pet ownership more difficult or expensive.

Any change in containment policy needs to have a transition period and support/advice from cat behaviourists to help cats adjust to any changes in their husbandry. It is easy to blame owners for not doing the right thing, but they need to be assisted to do this in a way that is cat friendly.

Farm/barn cats need very different policies to ensure they remain on their owner's property but are not restricted from roaming that property.

Animal Care Australia does not object to removal of feral cats from native areas. Containment is not an option for these cats at all, even from a cat welfare perspective.

### **d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership**

#### **Initiatives**

Identifying the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership is difficult without any studies conducted in Australia and without specific statistics or surveys.

Survey results are only as good as the data that is entered by those providing information about themselves. The various surveys completed in the past 3 years shows that the number of pet cats in Australia is consistent at approximately 5,000,000. Approximately 33% of households in Australia own at least one cat.

A 2023 survey on Cat Welfare commissioned by the Cat Protection Society in NSW <sup>3</sup> indicates that 21% of the 519 people surveyed reported that they got their cat from a friend, neighbour, or family members and 19% from a shelter, which is consistent with the same survey conducted in 2019.

We need to be mindful that most people who complete these surveys are generally responsible pet owners whose cats are desexed and do all the right things.

Statistics are needed on those who are not being responsible pet owners and that is the challenge to identify those people and approach them in a way that they feel safe that there will be no consequences for the answers to their questions.

Solutions like targeted community programs or nighttime curfews may offer some mitigation by focusing on high-impact times or specific areas to reduce negative impacts without overburdening pounds.

There needs to be clear, targeted, and easily accessible information for education programs. Navigating government websites is not easy. Local council websites appear are designed to hide

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<sup>3</sup> [Cat Protection Society survey](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



information rather than provide it. Unless you know where to look specifically, it can be difficult to obtain information about pet ownership responsibilities with many people relying on information that they have been told. This leads to misunderstanding and incorrect education being passed on.

When you do find the information, it is not always clear and is open to interpretation. In 2024, there are still people who do not understand that registering the microchip for their cat is different from the lifetime registration.

By involving a diverse group of stakeholders in education efforts, communities can help foster a culture of responsible pet ownership, leading to better outcomes for both pets and their environments. The more people that spread the message, the wider the audience. These should include:

- ✓ Local Governments and Councils
- ✓ Animal Welfare Organisations (Animal Care Australia, etc)
- ✓ Animal Compliance and Enforcement Organisations (RSPCA & Animal Welfare League)
- ✓ Veterinarians
- ✓ Schools and Youth Organisations
- ✓ Community Leaders and Social Groups
- ✓ Pet Retailers and Pet Industry Representatives
- ✓ Approved Cat Registration Bodies (such as NSW Cat Fanciers Association, ANCATS and CatsNSW)
- ✓ Breeders
- ✓ Pet Owners

Responsible pet ownership should be a common, everyday conversation and people should be educated on what the expectation is.

To ensure a happy and healthy life for an indoor cat, certain environmental and care needs must be met. Providing an enriching, safe, and comfortable environment is key to their well-being, including (but not limited to):

- Space to Explore and Climb
- Enrichment and Mental Stimulation
- Litter Box
- Scratching Posts
- Comfortable Sleeping Areas
- Proper Nutrition
- Grooming
- Health Care
- Companionship

Many people keep the locations of cat colonies secret due to the fear that the cats will be trapped and euthanised, as well as fear for the safety of the colony and negative public sentiment. The secret

and transient nature of cat colonies does not promote good welfare outcomes as the cats are unknown and unidentified and have no direct access to veterinary care if required. The ability for the community to adopt these cats and move them off the streets into ownership should be encouraged and this can only be achieved if the negativity towards these cats is altered.

## **(e) implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies**

Compliance can be challenging, requiring public education, enforcement resources, and potentially financial support for cat owners to adapt their homes.

Support like subsidies for installing screens or building cat enclosures can encourage owners to comply with containment policies.

Strong public awareness campaigns and consistent messaging about the ecological and health benefits of containment are also essential to gaining community support.

Mandatory containment can also affect staff welfare for those in creating, implementing, and enforcing these policies:

- the knowledge that impounding cats because of a breach of the containment policy may result in higher euthanasia rates and constant containment efforts contribute to mental health strain and job burnout among animal management workers.
- discouragement of cat ownership due to fear of penalties, which might increase pet abandonment, leading to even more stray cats requiring impoundment.
- varying approaches by different urban and regional Councils in NSW (and across Australia wide) can create confusion for cat owners, especially if you have neighbouring urban Councils with different approaches and policies and a cat happens to be picked up outside of its owners' local council boundary. Consistency across Councils is vital here.
- Regulatory and community challenges require collaborative approaches being local and state governments, as well as organisations representing various community groups (conservationists and pet owners)
- While containment policies are effective, successful widespread implementation will depend on legislative changes, better resources for local councils, and efforts to build public support through education and incentives for containment practices.

In Hornsby Council, a proposal was made that any cats found by rangers outside of their home without a collar, microchip or other identification would be euthanised immediately.

This is completely unreasonable considering that cats could have escaped a pet sitter, cattery, or veterinary clinic, or the microchip may have failed – which happens more frequently than is reported, as they are rarely tested after implant.

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



These anti-cat policies should not be permitted under any legislation or Council By-laws, and need protections in place to allow for reasonable attempts for an owner to find their lost cat.

Many councils do not have local pound facilities, outsourcing to out-of-area pound services. This makes it harder for owners to locate lost pets, especially when owners do not have transport to get to these locations.

Animal Care Australia is aware of many instances where owners call pounds, are told their cat is not there, and then later find their animal was euthanised after the holding period expired. Some pounds do list photos of animals, but the photos are so poor in terms of clarity or showing enough of the animal to identify them, and this does not help. Greater oversight of councils and pounds is needed in this space to ensure all efforts are made to get owned cats back home.

### **(f) the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs**

The challenge with any program is cost and finding the funding to provide these services is essential, either through local or state government or private sector or donations.

The financial costs of large-scale cat desexing programs can vary significantly depending on factors such as the geographic region, socioeconomic areas and whether the desexing is done through private veterinarians or subsidised by government or animal welfare organisations.

Those working in private practices in the veterinary industry should not be expected to provide their time and services for free.

It is not surprising that the higher proportion of pet cats that are desexed will provide wide scale benefits. Desexed cats cannot produce kittens that end up being given away to friends or family or find their way into the pound and shelter system.

Large-scale cat desexing programs are an effective, humane, and cost-efficient solution to manage stray cat populations. They offer numerous benefits, including the reduction of shelter intake and euthanasia rates, better animal health, and positive environmental and community outcomes. However, again, clarifying the ownership or origin of the cats about to be desexed poses major deterrents. People are afraid to bring cat colony members to be desexed in fear the cats may be euthanised or they themselves could be fined for having an unregistered or non-microchipped cat. The system needs to be changed if we are truly going to see all cats that require to be desexed actually treated.

Through widespread implementation and public education, these programs can have a lasting impact on both animal welfare and ecological balance.

However, they do not address the impact that colony/semi owned and feral cats have on communities and wildlife. It will reduce the reproduction opportunities for those already within a colony.

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



While private practice veterinarians recognise the risks of surgery and potential long term health impacts, most will desex only after 6 months of age – for the sake of the patient. While pounds and shelters advocate for desexing as early as possible – even as young as 6 weeks of age – as a population control measure. The patient (the animal) is simply not the priority.

Australian Vets in QLD report<sup>4</sup> that almost all of their client's cats are desexed, while the opposite is reported by RSPCAQ - almost all surrendered cats are not desexed. Clearly, the cats that are seen by veterinarians and the cats that the RSPCA see are not the same population of cats. The same study noted that while vets are usually seeing the owner and carer of the cat, shelters are primarily receiving animals that are strays handed in by someone who is not the owner of the cat

This suggests that pounds, shelters, and rehoming organisations have a skewed view of pet owners, and feel that owners are irresponsible, and therefore should not have a choice when their pet is desexed. While the pet and vet industry has a very different perspective of pet ownership, with very high rates of desexing, even when done at a later age.

### Reduction in Stray Populations

Desexing programs help control the number of stray cats, significantly reducing overpopulation. This is particularly effective in urban and semi-urban areas where large numbers of unowned and feral cats live. By preventing reproduction, desexing directly decreases the number of kittens born into an already struggling population. A 2023 study by the Cat Protection Society in NSW<sup>5</sup> found an increase in the willingness of people to adopt or take-in a stray cat if the cat could be desexed for free (or subsidised).

### Decreased Euthanasia Rates

Large-scale desexing programs, often combined with adoption and rehoming initiatives, help reduce the number of cats entering shelters and pounds. This not only alleviates the overcrowding in shelters but also leads to a decrease in euthanasia rates. In Australia, where shelters have faced significant pressure from stray populations, successful desexing initiatives have been linked to fewer cats being surrendered or impounded, and as a result, fewer need to be euthanised

### Improved Animal Health

Desexing also has significant health benefits for cats.

It reduces the risk of certain cancers (such as uterine and ovarian cancers in females and testicular cancer in males) and behavioral issues like territorial aggression and the urge to roam. This leads to healthier, longer lives for cats, whether they are pets or part of managed feral colonies. These health benefits further support animal welfare by reducing the need for veterinary interventions

### Cost-Effectiveness for Animal Welfare Organisations

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<sup>4</sup> [MDPI Report on Private Vets and Cat Desexing](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Cat Protection Society study](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



Although desexing programs can involve upfront costs, they are cost-effective in the long term. By reducing the number of kittens born and preventing the spread of stray cat populations, shelters can save resources that would otherwise go into care, feeding, and medical treatment of unowned cats. For example, studies have shown that for every dollar spent on a desexing program, there is a significant return in terms of reduced future intake costs

### **Positive Community and Environmental Impact**

Desexing programs have wider community and environmental benefits. By reducing the number of stray cats, these initiatives decrease the impact of cats on native wildlife, as well as reducing nuisance behaviors such as yowling, fighting, and scavenging. This helps foster a healthier ecosystem and better quality of life for humans in affected areas. For example, in Australia, cities with robust cat desexing programs have reported a decline in both feral cat numbers and therefore wildlife predation.

### **Public Education and Engagement**

Large-scale desexing programs often go hand in hand with public education efforts. These programs can educate pet owners about the importance of desexing to prevent overpopulation and promote responsible pet ownership. The outreach aspect of these initiatives encourages a broader cultural shift toward more sustainable pet ownership practice, and these initiatives need to be encouraged on a larger scale. Governments at levels acknowledge education is key and yet so few actually invest the appropriate level of financial investment.

### **Trap – Neuter – Return:**

Desexing colony or community cats is beneficial in reducing the continued production of cats unchecked. This will provide short term impacts and focusing on desexing male cats will have an immediate impact – a female cat cannot get pregnant without a male cat.

It may seem counter intuitive to return cats to the same locations as they will still be roaming. Cats will still predate regardless of whether they are being fed by humans. It is argued that returning said desexed males will assist in controlling the expansion of the colony, and while this is true in the short term the younger virile cats will eventually take over the colony unless continued efforts to trap all male cats and desex them can be maintained for the long term. These males also break away and create their own new colonies potentially providing the expansion of larger stray and ultimately feral cat issues.

More knowledge and research is needed on the impacts of a TNR scheme in Australia. Most research relating to TNR initiatives comes from Europe where it is deemed to be successful or from the United States where there have been major failures reported. The Australian landscape would reflect both of these scenarios and therefore greater focus on research into some Australian trials is vital before flying headfirst into recommending these initiatives.

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



- ☒ There is no evidence that any data on the impact to wildlife has been collected or reported that it is associated with TNR Programs.
- ☒ Research is needed to determine if and how this type of program would be suitable for cat management in urban areas versus our greater expanses of uninhabited areas.
- ☒ There is a cost factor involved with no clear pathway as to who will incur these costs and ongoing care or support for the colonies.

### Free or Subsidised Desexing:

Some councils are offering this to their local residents already, and there is an established process run by the National Desexing Network.

The National Desexing Network (NDN)<sup>6</sup> is a nationwide referral system for discounted desexing made available to pet owners in financial need. It connects local councils, pet owners and vets to be able to provide free or subsidised desexing.

Animal Care Australia has not contacted NDN to enquire as to how the scheme works and we recommend this should be something for this Inquiry to investigate further.

RSPCA NSW reported in 2023 that a trial of free desexing in the Greenacre local council area<sup>7</sup> has reduced the number of kittens coming into their shelter by a third in its first year. This is information obtained via a news article and the numbers of kittens pre and post the trial are not specified which is why accurate studies are required and data reported publicly.

### (g) the impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system

In 2023, Animal Care Australia provided extensive feedback to the NSW Inquiry into Pounds<sup>8</sup> and more detailed information can be found our submission.

Without knowing specific data about cats being impounded, the impact of cat containment could be varied. There are also many other factors such as desexing and records being maintained that are necessary to make an accurate assessment. Logic tells us that if pounds are currently seeing a large number of cats that are neither microchipped nor desexed then the majority are stray cats, or semi-owned cats.

This same logic would then envisage that the containment of cats would lead to a reduction in roaming domestic males, resulting in a reduction of roaming domestic females becoming pregnant.

However, to see any major impact on the numbers of cats finding their way into pounds would require an expanded and exhaustive program of issues with stray cats, desexing and rehoming of those cats (where possible) in order to reduce new colonies and larger feral populations. This is

<sup>6</sup> [National Desexing Network](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Greenacre Local Desexing initiative](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Animal Care Australia submission to NSW Inquiry into Pounds](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



highlighted in claims made that cat containment policies in Victoria have failed because numbers entering pounds have not dropped. However, as is also pointed out those Councils have not introduced programs to deal with the stray cat populations OR have found it difficult to designate significant resources to doing so.<sup>9</sup>

Better programs and understanding of stray (and feral) cat behaviours, colonies and alike, combined with a feral cat control program that removes them humanely from the environment is what it would take to see cat populations in pounds and shelters reduced by significant proportions. Only then can a true assessment of these policies be determined.

Another contributing factor to the potential failure of these policies is the ability of the residents within that area to comply. Cat containment policies become a social justice issue, which will require greater support from both the local council and also the state government.<sup>10</sup>

The economic costs of constructing and ensuring appropriate containment cannot be met by those within lower socioeconomic areas. Enclosures can cost anything from \$700 up to several thousand dollars.

Of course, the avoidance of even one cat into the pound system is of significance and this is why a simple cat containment policy of restricted mobility of domestic cats is not sufficient.

In an ideal world, a pet cat's owner will:

- ✓ keep it indoors or a secure outdoor enclosure,
- ✓ ensure that it is microchipped and lifetime registered,
- ✓ keep their contact details updated,
- ✓ have it desexed (if not already when it comes into their care).

If this were to happen, cats ending up in the pound or shelter system would easily be returned to their owners and their impact is minimised in the larger scheme of things.

In an ideal world, there would be a process around microchipping and registering colony (or community cats) so there is a way to track them if they required vet care or ended up in pounds/shelters. Where their ownership could be recorded by means of a community group or residential area. This would lend itself to encouraging those communities to take more responsibility for the behaviour and welfare of the cats without the fear of retribution or persecution when things go wrong.

In reality, most cats that end up in pounds, shelters and rescues are not microchipped or the information is not up to date. They are stray cats (community cats /semi owned cats) or kittens born into feral cat communities.

<sup>9</sup> [Pet Welfare Foundation – article 1](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Pet Welfare Foundation – article 2](#)



## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



### Positive Impacts:

**Reduced Intake of Stray Cats:** Cat containment laws, which typically require pet owners to keep their cats indoors or within enclosed areas, will help prevent cats from becoming lost or abandoned. This may lead to fewer strays being collected and brought into Council pounds.

**Decreased Euthanasia Rates:** As fewer cats are brought into shelters, the burden on these facilities is reduced, allowing more space for animals that are harder to place. This can help lower euthanasia rates, as shelters are not overwhelmed with excess animals.

**Reduced Pressure on Resources:** Should Councils implement Community Cat Programs based on high-intensity free desexing and microchipping of cats along with introducing cat containment policies, fewer cats will be entering shelters, animal welfare organisations can focus their resources on other areas, such as medical care, rehabilitation, and adoption efforts. Shelters can also allocate more funds to spay/neuter programs, helping to prevent future overpopulation.

**Long-Term Behavioural Change:** By encouraging responsible pet ownership through containment policies, communities become more proactive about pet care. As pet owners are more likely to keep cats contained and prevent them from roaming, there is a longer-term reduction in the number of unowned cats, further benefiting animal pounds and the broader communities.

### Negative Impacts

When containment measures are enforced, more cats may be brought to pounds especially unowned or semi-owned cats, creating a surge in impoundments. For pounds, this additional pressure can be challenging, both financially and logistically, especially in communities with limited resources.

**Increased Surrender Rates:** Cat containment laws can lead to increased surrender rates as some pet owners may not be willing or able to comply with containment regulations. This includes owners who might have difficulty keeping their cats indoors, especially in rural or low-income areas where outdoor space is common. As a result, these cats might be brought to shelters, adding pressure to already overburdened facilities.

**Higher Costs for Shelters:** Animal shelters may experience a rise in operational costs related to enforcing containment regulations. This includes costs associated with trapping, microchipping, and extra administrative work to track and manage impounded cats. In some cases, shelters must invest in increased staffing and resources to handle the greater number of cats, especially in communities with large stray populations that are only now being addressed by the enforcement of containment policies.

**Increase in Euthanasia:** The containment policy shift may also result in higher euthanasia rates in the short term. Shelters that face a spike in surrendered or impounded cats may not have the capacity to accommodate all animals, particularly if local adoptions do not keep pace with intake. In some cases, this can lead to euthanasia, especially for cats deemed "unadoptable" due to health or behavioural

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



issues. This is where clear definitions of the differences between stray cats to feral cats is vital. Phase-in periods for containment policies will also assist in this space allowing the community to adapt to the changes without immediate and possibly deadly consequences, but also providing councils with an opportunity to phase in initiatives to deal with the collection, desexing, microchipping and subsequent rehoming of stray and unowned cats. Adopting different steps in policies allows for the phases to avoid sudden and overwhelming influxes of cats into the system.

**Public Resistance and Non-Compliance:** In some communities, the introduction of containment laws may face resistance from the public, especially from individuals who view outdoor access as essential for their cats' well-being. Non-compliance can lead to more enforcement actions, potentially straining local resources as animal control officers may be required to manage non-compliant pet owners and deal with increased numbers of cats being brought into the system

**Negative Impact on Community Engagement:** As shelter capacity is strained, some communities may see a decline in their engagement with local shelters, particularly in urban areas where the enforcement of containment laws may seem burdensome. This disengagement can affect donations, volunteer efforts, and adoption rates, undermining the long-term sustainability of shelters. Again, greater education and phasing in of policies will assist in this space.

### **(h) the outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories**

The effectiveness of cat containment measures across Australia has varied by state and territory, with several regions introducing policies aimed at reducing the negative environmental impact of cats on native wildlife.

In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), a policy introduced in 2022 requires all cats born after July 1st to be kept indoors or within controlled outdoor areas like catios. This policy applies to new cats and those living in designated "cat-sensitive" areas. The ACT has found that cat containment not only helps protect wildlife but also improves the welfare of cats, as they are less likely to be hit by cars or attacked by predators, leading to longer, healthier lives. This was followed through with fines for non-compliant pet owners but after a grace period expired.

Free or subsidised desexing programs in places like Banyule City Council (which is predominantly a low socio-economic area) have helped reduce the number of unwanted kittens that might have otherwise contributed to the feral cat populations. In the third year after implementing a high-intensity free desexing program (community cat program) the Council reported <sup>11</sup>:

- impoundments decreased by 61%
- euthanasia decreased by 74%
- cat-related calls decreased by 64% (from 11 to 4 cat calls/1000 residents)

<sup>11</sup> [Banyule Council\(Cotterell 2021, Banyule 2020\)](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



- since 2013, Banyule has spent \$60,000 on its free desexing program and saved \$397,500 on cat impoundment costs alone.

It should be noted this Council did not have a mandated cat containment policy in place.

A 2023 trial of free desexing in the Greenacre (NSW) Local Council area has reduced the number of kittens coming into their shelter by a third in its first year. This is information obtained via a news article<sup>12</sup> and the numbers of kittens pre and post the trial are not specific which is why accurate studies are required and data reported publicly.

### (i) options for reducing the feral cat population

Firstly, a clear definition of a 'feral' cat must be agreed to. Stray and feral cats have long divided the community with opposing views on the solution. Without data on how many cats fall into the stray and feral categories and the locations, any solution becomes challenging.

A clear distinction needs to be made about the treatment of the 3 main categories of cats as they are not the same – pet cats, stray cats, and feral cats.

**Stray Cats:** *These are cats that are most likely to have been a pet cat at some point and socialised with people. The longer these types of cats remain as strays increases the potential for them to fall into the feral category as their contact with humans decreases.*

**Feral Cats:** *These are cats that are not formally owned or cared for by people. They survive by hunting for themselves and living in a variety of habitats (urban, rural and bushland). These are actively hunting for food to survive and the most dangerous of the cat categories as an invasive species.*

### Trap – Neuter – Return

Whilst it may not seem irrational in the short term to return a desexed cat to the same location and environment, we need to consider longer term solutions. The fact is that those cats are not able to produce more kittens, and therefore the cycle of those cats contributing to the feral population ceases – but only temporarily.

- We are fighting a losing battle if we are targeting desexing all cats in a colony.
- There is little to no research in Australian conditions as to whether this program works.
- It will reduce numbers for a period of years as cats who are part of the colony will be unable to breed, however as the colony gets older there will be younger cats coming in to take over.
- There is no evidence that any data on the impact to wildlife has been collected or reported that it is associated with TNR Programs.

<sup>12</sup> [ABC News article: Greenacre Local Council](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



- Research is needed to determine if and how this type of program would be suitable for cat management in urban areas, especially given the predatory and playful behaviour that is instinctually exhibited by cats.
- There is a cost factor involved with no clear pathway as to who will incur these costs and ongoing care or support for the colonies.

More data and trialing is required for **Trap, Neuter and Rehoming** initiatives, especially given the potential reluctance of the community to accept an ex-feral cat. What behaviour-changing measures would be used and would these be long-lasting? Once the cat was rehomed, would it instinctively re-roam? If yes, for this to be successful would require an implemented cat containment policy.

### Alternative Solutions

Without considering alternative solutions to eradicating stray and feral cats in NSW, these cats will continue to reproduce and not be afforded any veterinary care required. Like all solutions, there is always a cost factor and the debate will be about who should bear the cost.

### Conservation Fencing:

Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) <sup>13</sup> have created predator free areas across Australia with the use of fencing to keep out certain feral animals (e.g., foxes, cats, rabbits, pigs, goats & dingoes/wild dogs).

AWC have created 11 sanctuaries <sup>14</sup> across Australia covering 12.9 million hectares, and have worked with private landholders, governments and indigenous groups. They are completing surveys at the same time to provide actual data about the conservation work being completed and the impacts on the environment and wildlife.

### Baiting and other measures

In 2023 Animal Care Australia provided extensive feedback<sup>15</sup> to the Federal Government 'Feral Cats Threat abatement Plan'. Animal Care Australia's primary recommendations included:

- Animal Care Australia strongly OPPOSES allowing individual councils to set cat free suburbs
- Animal Care Australia strongly opposes providing Local Councils with greater powers – particularly in placing household limits on pet ownership.
- Government needs to monitor invasive species and develop achievable management plans rather than relying on quick cost effective – short-term measures.

<sup>13</sup> [Australian Wildlife Conservancy](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Waratah Conservation Fencing](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Animal Care Australia response to 'Threat Abatement Plan for Feral Cats'](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



- Animal Care Australia supports refining the use of existing tools, and to develop new tools, for directly controlling feral cats, and make the tools appropriately accessible, with the caveat that all reports and research results are publicly released for stakeholder feedback.
- Animal Care Australia welcomes and supports the inclusion of the following with the Threat Abatement Plan and we hope this is a requirement that all states and territories must adopt:
  - Mesopredator control by dingoes: Carry out research to evaluate how dingo management could affect feral cat abundance and impacts and the consequences of such effects on threatened species and ecosystem resilience, and then develop costed options for landholders at regional scale.
  - Toxic baits (Eradicat, Curiosity, History) and alternative toxin presentations (e.g., Felixer) are registered and available for use in those parts of Australia where their use is justified based on the biodiversity benefit, overall humaneness, and sustainability.
  - The biodiversity benefits, and attendant risks, of shooting, trapping, and tracking for controlling cats, in different contexts, are better quantified.
  - The use of guardian dogs to repel cats from sites supporting populations of cat-susceptible species has been trialed and evaluated.
  - The potential to develop synthetic biology (e.g., immunocontraception, gene drives) to reduce populations of cats is explored.
  - Improved understanding of the extent to which cat recognition and avoidance by native prey species can be encouraged via managed selection.
- Animal Care Australia STRONGLY SUPPORTS a One Health approach by all parties invested in the implementation of the Threat Abatement Plan.

### In relation to the use of baits:

Poison baits are currently being used, and there will always be a measure of pain caused by ingesting a poison designed to kill. A continued review of all stages of the poison life cycle must be undertaken to improve methods for future years.

Any version of euthanasia must be humane, and any pain, discomfort and distress must be minimised as far as possible. There is ongoing debate as to the humaneness of using poisons in baits, the level of pain they cause as the animal dies and impacts on non-target species such as wildlife. This must be given greater consideration when looking at policies to control feral cat populations in NSW. The NSW code of practice for the effective and humane management of feral cats <sup>16</sup> (published in March 2022) states that their experience with baiting in large areas is not effective.

### Data collection is vital

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<sup>16</sup> [NSW COP for humane management of feral cats](#)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



Strategies are required from those collecting the 'data' to identify where the cats are coming from so that targeted education can be developed. The owner who lets their cat out in their backyard for a few hours per day in a secure environment is different from the owner who has cats that are not desexed living outside with minimal food.

Data is also required on the breakdown of cats being euthanised across NSW as not all cats in the 'feral' category fall into the definition. Cats who are scared will show similar signs to an unsocialised cat. Greater care and understanding is needed prior to euthanising so-called 'feral cats.'

### General comment

Containment policies of any kind must be introduced gradually to ensure that cat owners can learn how to help their cats transition to a more contained lifestyle. Old cats have a more difficult time with these transitions and are less frequent hunters any way – mostly just enjoying their usual sunny spots to sleep.

Cat owners have a history of dealing with behavioural issues quite poorly, and resources, support and funding for any necessary enclosures needs to be provided by councils or the State to ensure that people are able to comply. These changes will not be cheap for some owners, and it is unfair to change the rules on people, many years into owning a cat and then blame them for not being able to adapt.

Not helping cat owners with the transition will inevitably lead to more surrenders, lost pets, and abandonment. Many owners are not members of cat or other animal clubs or in cat owner groups online and may not be aware of the law changes at all.

All of this will add a burden on the already overwhelmed pound and rescue industry. Funds need to be invested in responsible pet ownership to prevent this.

Pro cat keeping outreach will also be necessary to ensure that community cats will be taken into homes by their existing carers.

Many cultures do not have histories of indoor cats, and these migrants do not see cats as indoor pets. Allowances must be made to ensure that these communities can take ownership of these cats (containment to the owner's property, not HOUSE) while working within cultural norms, and providing resources/funding or advice to get set up initially

Animal Care Australia strongly recommends cat management policies must include:

- Investment in education about responsible pet ownership.
- Develop ongoing strategies in all areas of NSW to assist people to be able to fund the desexing of their animals.
- Provide a clearer pathway through local government for approval of secure cat containment on their properties (enclosures)

## Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales 2024



- Investments in research and studies on all programs/initiatives to obtain the data required about their impacts.
- Consult with conservation experts to look at large scale fencing to create predator free zones

Animal Care Australia thank you for this opportunity and welcome any questions the Committee may have and the opportunity to provide testimony at the Inquiry.

This submission can be publicly listed.

On behalf of the Animal Care Australia Committee,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'M Donnelly'.

Michael Donnelly  
President  
Animal Care Australia

*This submission has been developed in consultation with a range of members of Animal Care Australia, including the Animal Care Australia Cat Advisory Group.*