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INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: RSPCA NSW

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Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales
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Introduction

Management of feral and domestic cats in Australia is a long-standing and complex challenge. Effective cat management requires a high level of government and community support, and communication and coordination between all stakeholders; aspects which are often difficult to achieve and maintain over time (RSPCA Australia, 2023).

Critically, the different types of cat populations must be considered in any successful cat management policy. Throughout this document, the following terminology will be applied (RSPCA Australia, 2018):

Feral - a feral cat is unowned and unsocialised, reproduces in the wild and has no relationship or dependence on humans. Feral cats cannot be rehomed.

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. The owned cat may be contained, partially contained or uncontained.

Semi-owned – these cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider they own them. They are of varying sociability with many socialised to humans and may be associated with one or more households. The semi-owned cat's survival is supported by humans but the cat is not contained.

Unowned – these cats are indirectly dependent on humans with some having casual and temporary interactions with humans. They are of varying sociability, including some who are unsocialised to humans, and may live in groups. Unowned cats are uncontained.

Domestic cats – owned, semi-owned and unowned cats.

Contained – keeping a domestic cat within the owner's property boundaries. This may include utilising a suitable enclosure, fencing or keeping the cat indoors. Containment may be continuous or partial (e.g. only at night).

Terms of reference

That 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

The impact of cats on threatened native animals differs according to the population of cats and their location. Therefore, when discussing the impact of cats on wildlife populations, it is critical to

separate the impacts of feral cat populations from domestic cat (owned, semi-owned and unowned) populations.

RSPCA NSW acknowledges that predation from feral cats is estimated to account for approximately 456 million individual native animal deaths each year (Murphy et al., 2019). However, there is no strong evidence quantifying the impact that domestic cats have on threatened native wildlife populations.

Hunting is a very strong instinct, even for owned cats who are fed daily (Ellis et al., 2013). Studies show that the majority of domestic cats do hunt when given the opportunity, although individual cats vary significantly in their predilection for hunting and their prey preference (Bruce et al., 2019; Dickman and Newsome, 2015; Legge et al., 2020; Moseby et al., 2015; Woinarski et al., 2017).

The impact of domestic cats on biodiversity also depends greatly on the cats' location. In highly urbanised settings, there is evidence that introduced species are more commonly hunted than native species. A Canberra survey of cat owners found that 75% of owned cats hunted, with 64% of prey being rodents, 14% native birds and 10% introduced birds and a few reptiles and frogs (Barratt, 1998). Cat predation on introduced black rats was shown to have a positive effect on tree-nesting birds in remnant bushland in metropolitan Sydney (Matthews et al., 1999). In urban locations, land clearing and other human activities have been found to have a greater impact on wildlife populations than predation by cats (Lilith et al., 2010; Lunney et al., 2007).

In non-urban areas, especially near National Parks, predation by cats has a greater impact. Domestic cats living near a NSW National Park, preyed mainly on native mammals (49%), then introduced mammals (26%), followed by native birds (19%) and reptiles (6%) (Meek, 2003). Thus, any management strategy employed to support native wildlife populations must be designed based on the key threats at the particular location.

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

Effectiveness of cat containment policies
To measure the effectiveness of cat containment policies it is important to consider the purpose of the policies. To have an effect, these policies must achieve one or more of the following outcomes:

- Reduced wildlife predation
- Reduced cat nuisance issues
- Reduced pound and shelter intake
- Improved feline welfare

The RSPCA Australia "Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia 2018' report acknowledged,

"Overall, councils with cat containment regulations have not been able to demonstrate any measurable reduction in cat complaints or cats wandering at large following the introduction of the regulations" (RSPCA Australia, 2018).

In low socioeconomic and rural areas, unowned and semi-owned domestic cats can make up a significant percentage, if not the majority, of uncontained cats and these cats often disproportionately contribute to nuisance concerns (Ma et al., 2023). Without an owner, these cats

will not be contained, rendering cat containment polices ineffectual. If it is conceived that these policies provide a mechanism for successfully managing unowned cats, this is not the case. Cat containment policies are difficult and expensive to enforce and trapping, culling or impounding uncontained cats are unacceptable, inhumane and ineffective ways to manage these populations (Hurley and Levy, 2022; Miller et al., 2014).

Feline welfare is served by allowing cats safe, outdoor access. Ideally, all cats should have the benefits of access to the outdoors in a safe contained outdoor environment. This helps to provide a more complex environment that increases the cat's opportunity for choice, activity, and stimulation, which has significant benefits for the cat's physical and mental wellbeing. There are some circumstances under which a cat's physical and mental needs will not be successfully met in containment due to a range of factors including the presence of other animals, space available, human factors, and ability to modify the property. There are also some cats who are unable to cope with containment ("RSPCA Cat containment position paper," 2023). Consequently, even if there were high levels of compliance with cat containment policies, it cannot be concluded that they will improve cat welfare. There is an opportunity for research to determine how people choose to contain their cats, what proportion are provided outdoor access within the boundary of the property and the welfare of cats within different management approaches.

An additional welfare risk associated with these policies is that they have the potential to demonise cats ("RSPCA Cat containment position paper," 2023). Mandatory containment may fuel anti-cat sentiment in the community leading to increased deliberate cruelty against cats.

The RSPCA encourages owners to keep cats contained in environments that meet their physical and mental needs. However, given the current lack of evidence on the outcomes associated with 24/7 mandatory companion cat containment and many complex potential negative consequences which may arise, the RSPCA does not currently support the introduction of mandatory 24/7 cat containment legislation.

Support for the introduction of mandatory 24/7 cat containment would need to be based on evidence that it can achieve the stated objectives for cats, wildlife, and the broader community, and that the potential negative consequences can be eliminated or effectively mitigated. The RSPCA supports and encourages such research ("RSPCA Cat containment position paper," 2023).

Cat containment policies are unable, in isolation, to effectively address the issues associated with cats and their management. Effective cat management requires the thoughtful implementation of evidence-based strategies which will differ according to the different cat population types. They need to be informed by knowledge of what impact each cat population is having on the areas of concern. Furthermore, to be successful, strategies must be feasible to implement. For example, targeted desexing programs have proven effective in reducing the problems associated with uncontained cats including reducing nuisance complaints, impoundment / shelter intake and euthanasia (Hurley and Levy, 2022).

Potential barriers to the effectiveness of cat containment policies.

1. Human factors:

As many as half of the estimated 3.3 million cat-owning households in Australia did not intentionally acquire their cat(s) (Animal Medicines Australia, 2022). Many of these "passively acquired" cats originate from semi-owned and unowned populations or are the result of unplanned breeding amongst owned cats.

Populations of unowned cats are disproportionately found in low socioeconomic areas, and people on low incomes are much more likely to experience financial barriers to accessing surgical desexing for their cats. As such, cats are substantially more likely to be passively acquired by people with less resources to effectively keep them contained (Zito et al., 2016). It is important to note that containment approaches that support feline welfare typically involve secured outdoor enclosures attached to the house, financial investment in multiple resources such as climbing and hiding structures, multiple litter trays and toys. Sufficient time is required to engage each cat in predatory style play (Ellis et al., 2013).

Nonetheless, our research and experience in the field through the RSPCA NSW's Keeping Cats Safe At Home (KCSAH) project suggest there is a trend towards full cat containment in Australia. Full containment is increasingly a social norm to the extent that cat caregivers who allow their cats to roam feel victimised, shamed, and guilty. This is a group who are highly sensitised to messaging around containment and are very defensive.

This understanding of cat ownership dynamics highlights the following concerns:

- Mandatory containment will limit who can be a cat owner and will disproportionately impact people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Mandatory containment will create equity issues for existing cat owners; not all cat caregivers can effectively contain cats where they live for example due to rental requirements and the lack of pet-friendly housing available in NSW.
- Many cat owners have obtained their cats (whether passively or actively) with a view that they would live outside for various reasons (McLeod et al., 2015).

As a consequence, mandatory cat containment is likely to lead to increased rates of abandonment or relinquishment of cats where owners are unwilling or unable to confine their cat (for financial or other reasons).

Mandatory containment will also create barriers to effectively managing unowned/ semi-owned cats. Cat containment policies do not effectively address these populations of uncontained cats as by definition, they do not have an owner willing to contain them despite any policy that is introduced.

Despite not considering themselves the "owner", caregivers of unowned cats ("semi-owners") frequently have high levels of attachment to the cats they care for and are opposed to management approaches that do not ensure good welfare outcomes for the cats involved (Rand et al., 2024). In our experience, "semi-owners" hide unowned cats and actively sabotage efforts to trap and remove them. Effective approaches to manage uncontained, unowned and semi-owned cats require them to be managed in situ (e.g. through targeted desexing programs) and require the buy-in of their caregivers (or "semi-owners") (Hurley and Levy, 2022).

Many of the caregivers of semi-owned cats cannot contain these cats because their housing does not allow cats inside, they already have as many owned cats as they can effectively contain or the cat is unsuitable to be contained for a variety of reasons including its degree of socialization (Ma et al., 2023). It is important that these semi-owners are supported by government wherever possible, as they perform an important role in finding, socialising, and caring for these populations of cats, functions that might otherwise fall on local councils at considerable expense (Centre for International Economics, 2022). Rather than place the additional burden of containment legislation on these semi-owners, government should encourage and support them to take responsibility for semi-owned cats. It is thought that between 3–10% of Australian adults "feed an average of 1.5 cats daily that they do not perceive they own" (Ma et al., 2023; Rand et al., 2024) . Most cat semi-owners in NSW also have their own pet cats, many of whom are fully contained (Ma et al., 2023).

Placing additional restrictions on these semi-owners is likely to result in abandonment of care-giving responsibility. Requirements to permanently identify and register cats, and the annual permit fee for cats not desexed before four months are already serious barriers to effective unowned cat management programs. Further requirements to contain unowned or semi-owned cats will only add another barrier to effective management of these populations. Through KCSAH, RSPCA NSW has identified that for more than 85% of participants, desexing was the first visit the cat had had to a veterinarian. More support to allow these semi-owners to access veterinary care for semi-owned cats may help better manage these populations, not only by improving individual cat welfare but advancing desexing rates which reduce populations.

Cat containment policies, if enforced, are expensive for local governments and labour intensive due to the increased human and physical resources required to maintain such programs. Additional workload is created when containment policies are introduced as staff are required to respond to complaints about uncontained cats, trap, house and care for/ kill uncontained cats once caught by local government officers or presented to council by members of the public.

2. Cat factors:

Studies that report on cat containment behaviour of cat owners describe challenges in containing cats that relate to feline frustration behaviours (yowling, scratching, biting) and attempts to escape (McLeod et al., 2020). This is instructive as to the welfare impacts on the cats and the difficulty that exists in trying to meet their needs potentially without outdoor access (if an owner cannot provide this in their containment approach).

As discussed, many cats are passively acquired, particularly in lower socio-economic areas. These cats may be less socialised, or already accustomed to a free-roaming lifestyle, creating additional cat-related barriers to containment. Similarly, a significant portion of cats that enter shelters are of personality types that make them unsuccessful as pets in conventional homes. International Cat Care (iCat refer to these cats as "in-betweeners" and describe them as cats that:

Have previously been treated as pet cats but are often unsuccessful as pets, because they are uncomfortable to varying degrees with the close proximity of people. This could be as a result of a

lack of effective early socialisation with people, no early socialisation at all or a temperament trait that means they can be fearful or anxious of, or frustrated with, people. (Halls, n.d.)

International Cat Care advocates for alternative rehoming options for these cats such as being cared for as farm cats and stable cats. Containment policies limit the capacity for these cats to be rehomed to environments that meet their needs (specifically, maintaining some distance from people) and, consequently, euthanasia becomes a necessary consideration for more cats entering shelters and pounds.

(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

RSPCA NSW acknowledges that unrestricted outdoor access is associated with certain cat welfare risks including trauma, disease, fighting, poisoning and becoming lost or trapped. Contained cats live longer than those that are not contained. Thus, it is the position of RSPCA NSW that cats should be contained to the boundaries of the owner's property wherever possible and provided that the needs of the cat can be met in confinement ("RSPCA Cat containment position paper," 2023). Containment to the boundaries of an owner's property is considered the most appropriate way in which protect owned cats and wildlife. This approach is promoted by the RSPCA NSW through its Keeping Cats Safe At Home (KCSAH) program.

The RSPCA NSW considers that there are many benefits in allowing cats to have access to the outdoors including providing enrichment, exercise, choice and stimulation (De Assis and Mills, 2021). Access to the outdoors also allows cat to express natural behaviours. It is essential that when cats are contained, their physical and emotional needs are met. Containment can be inappropriate if owners cannot or do not invest the time, effort and resources necessary to meet the physical and emotional needs of their cats.

Cat containment policies put owned cats at risk of being kept in isolated and inappropriate locations or being subjected to inappropriate containment methods (such as in outdoor sheds, kennels, cages, barren enclosures or by tethering).

There will also be welfare compromise in households where cats are unable to sufficiently avoid noisy or aversive interactions such as may occur with the presence of young children or dogs (Ellis et al., 2013). Cats that have a reduced tolerance for human proximity (in-betweener cats) will be particularly compromised by these environments.

Cat containment also contributes to inter-cat tension in multi-cat households. Cats in multi-cat households often cope by placing distance between themselves and where available, one cat may spend more time outdoors to avoid the other cat. Where cats are contained, this is not as easy to achieve and can lead to considerable distress and conflict. Inter-cat tension has a detrimental effect on both the emotional and physical health of contained cats. It is largely under-recognised by owners but, where it escalates, inter-cat tension also increases stress for owners who are required to address issues that result. These include toileting outside of litter trays, veterinary costs to treat stress related illness (e.g. feline lower urinary tract disease) and fighting between cats (Rodan et al., 2024).

The prevalence of these feline welfare containment compromises requires examination through research efforts.

Indoor lifestyles have been associated with higher rates of certain serious feline diseases including obesity (Scarlett et al., 1994)and feline lower urinary tract disease (Amat et al., 2009a). It has also been reported that cats without outdoor access showed significantly more behaviour problems than those with outdoor access (Amat et al., 2009b). These physical and emotional illnesses are of great significance to feline welfare.

(d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives

It is important to determine what outcomes are intended to be delivered by education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives to consider their effectiveness. Possible objectives of these programs include, to:

- increase cat desexing rates
- reduce unowned cat populations (often measured by shelter and pound intake)
- reduce predation of native wildlife
- reduce cat nuisance issues
- increase rates of good quality, welfare enhancing cat containment
- improve feline welfare

There is value in funding programs that use a human behaviour change approach to increase the uptake of "responsible ownership" behaviours including good quality cat containment and desexing such as RSPCA NSW's Keeping Cats Safe at Home. There is a growing evidence base that informs the design and implementation of these projects, including research published by RSPCA NSW (Ma and McLeod, 2023).

Our research demonstrates that a lack of psychological capability is the main barrier to most cat caregivers containing their cats, i.e. their knowledge or psychological skills, strength or stamina to engage in the necessary mental process (Ma and McLeod, 2023). Education programs can be one important component of a human behaviour-change approach to increase psychological capability. However, a lack of physical capability, and a lack of motivation to contain their cat(s) are also important barriers for some groups of cat owners for whom education alone will be ineffective, necessitating a holistic behaviour change approach (Ma and McLeod, 2023).

KCSAH has been a four-year human behaviour change project assisted by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust which is due to conclude in December 2024. The project aimed to reduce impacts that domestic cats have on wildlife by encouraging cat caregivers to desex, permanently identify and register their cats and prevent them from roaming. KCSAH has used a holistic approach based on comprehensive stakeholder consultation and social science research. A major focus of the project has been developing high-quality information resources to provide cat caregivers with the information they need to successfully contain their cats while meeting all their needs. This information has been delivered to cat caregivers through a variety of channels including through local veterinary clinics, rehoming organisations, face-to-face events, social and traditional media outlets. Emphasis has been placed on ensuring content is engaging, positively framed, cat wellbeing-centred and solutions-focused and on creating a community of cat caregivers who can

encourage and support each other. The campaign has been positively received and has had considerable engagement; in financial year (FY) 2023 the campaign reached more than two million people through social media alone.

Recent Australian research suggests that cat containment is increasingly a social norm and community expectation. Research conducted in Tasmania in 2015 showed that one third of owned cats are contained to the owner's property at all times, with a further 20% of owned cats now being contained to the property overnight (McLeod et al., 2015). Whereas research from Queensland published in 2024 indicated that 51% of cat owners contained their cat 24/7 whilst a further 18% contained their cat at night (Rand et al., 2024). In NSW, Ma et al (2023) identified that "65% of NSW residents indicated they currently kept their cat(s) fully contained, with a further 24% containing their cats overnight."

Based on these results, it is arguable that formal cat containment policy may not be necessary in NSW. Rather, approaches including human behaviour change campaigns like KCSAH (that aim to increase cat caregiver motivation and capability to contain their cats and targeted desexing programs) aimed at reducing populations of semi-owned and unowned cats, and the number of cats who are passively acquired, are more likely to yield meaningful results.

Education programs cannot address cat management issues alone. Cat owners can only consider their ability to comply with legislative obligations, and the welfare needs of cats, if they are actively deciding on cat acquisition and ownership. The significant portion of cat owners who have passively acquired a cat may face significant barriers to successfully undertaking "responsible" ownership behaviours such as containment and desexing, despite knowing they are desirable approaches. Therefore, community education programs must be accompanied by programs that remove barriers to undertaking responsible ownership practices. Any program or initiative implemented must improve access to services that support owners to desex and microchip their cats.

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

Enforcement of cat containment laws is difficult. From a practical standpoint, in many areas, many uncontained cats are unowned. Therefore, there is no owner to trace in order to return the cat or to whom to issue a penalty to. This makes enforcement unfeasible in many instances. The resource intensiveness and challenges in enforcing these policies may result in councils simply not doing so. As an example, councils already have the power, under the *NSW Companion Animals Act 1998,* to fine cat owners for allowing their cats to roam in Wildlife Protection Areas. RSPCA NSW is not aware of any councils that are utilising these powers.

Implications for councils attempting to implement cat containment policies include issues such as the following:

- Cat containment programs require the purchase of traps, frequent and appropriate monitoring of traps, adequate numbers of appropriately trained staff and the availability of facilities to hold uncontained cats in accordance with legislative requirements.

- Cat containment policies can lead to increased levels of abandonment, relinquishment and lower rates of reclaim of impounded cats, due to avoidance of penalties associated with non-compliance by owners.
- When councils implement cat containment policies, they become responsible for the care and rehoming, or destruction, of unidentified, uncontained cats presented to their facilities. Costs of impounding, returning to owner, rehoming or euthanasing cats range from $79 to $1,031 per cat (Centre for International Economics, 2022).
- Evidence shows that when more cats are impounded, as occurs after introduction of cat containment policies, more cats are ultimately euthanised (Chua et al., 2023).
- The psychosocial effects for council staff involved in caring for and euthanising impounded cats cannot be underestimated. Euthanasia of healthy animals is known to cause moral injury, increases staff burnout, staff turnover and attrition rates.
- Cat containment policies lead to increases in cat nuisance complaints because these policies create an expectation that cats should not be seen. This increases the human resources required to address these complaints.

Enforcement of cat containment policies may include the trapping and euthanasia of cats. This approach has not only proven ineffective, over decades, it may also be counterproductive. Studies show that where cats are removed from a population, at insufficient intensity and duration, cat numbers may increase (Boone et al., 2019). This approach is also expensive, and does not have social licence. Culling programs put uncontained, unidentified (unmicrochipped), owned cats at risk of euthanasia. They fail to account for the group of people who care for semi-owned strays, many of whom have high levels of attachment to the cats they care for.

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

The RSPCA NSW recommends that targeted desexing programs be implemented as the main form of cat management policy in NSW.

Targeted desexing programs rapidly reduce cat-related nuisance complaints to councils, shelter cat intake and euthanasia rates. These programs reduce unowned cat populations by engaging with cat semi-owners to ensure unowned cats are desexed. Wildlife will benefit from reducing these populations.

These programs incorporate an element of human behaviour change by ensuring that for every participating cat, someone is designated as the person responsible for their ongoing care, thus challenging the feeding of unowned cats as a social norm. Ultimately, these programs convert semi-owners to owners, ensuring participating cats have the safety of oversight and care for life. Targeted desexing programs also aim to reduce unplanned breeding and abandonment from the owned cat population by improving accessibility of desexing services, especially for people overwhelmed with multiple cats.

Targeted desexing programs have been piloted through the RSPCA NSW project KCSAH in diverse NSW council areas with great success. In urban councils Campbelltown, Hornsby and Parramatta, where the KCSAH desexing programs have been utilised, cat nuisance complaints reduced by 56%, 29% and 40% respectively after the first year, compared to the average number of complaints received in the four years before the desexing program was implemented. In rural areas participating

in the KCSAH desexing program, nuisance complaints reduced by 81% in FY22-23 in Walgett and 84% in FY23-24 in Weddin.

Shelter intake from Campbelltown, Hornsby, Parramatta and Walgett also dramatically decreased after the targeted desexing program was introduced, with shelter intake reducing by 41% in FY22-23 in Parramatta and 63% from Campbelltown area, 49% from Hornsby and 99% from Walgett in FY23-24.

Targeted desexing programs have also quickly and dramatically reduce euthanasia rates for cats by preventing the birth of infants, and by providing an alternative pathway for unsocialised (often categorised as "feral") adults, the two groups who overwhelmingly contribute to euthanasia statistics in pounds and shelters (Centre for International Economics, 2022). In the first year KCSAH was implemented, euthanasia rates fell by between 24% in Campbelltown to 100% in Kyogle. After a second year (FY23-24), euthanasia rates in Campbelltown and Hornsby reduced by 81% and 73% respectively. Euthanasia in regional councils Weddin and Walgett reduced by 100%.

Importantly, targeted desexing programs are enthusiastically embraced by communities and promote improved relationships between councils and their communities, leading to better outcomes for both cats, wildlife and people. This is demonstrated in feedback from Council Animal Management Officer, Alison Knowles of Weddin Shire Council, who partnered on the KCSAH desexing program:

> *"The initial response from the community was overwhelming. As I've made such a point of working with the community and gaining trust, people are so much more willing to let me know before litters are born that they have a cat. They now understand there will be no repercussions or fines for having multiple cats, so we can deal with the problem before there are 4-6 more problems! Working with, instead of against people has achieved this result. Community feedback indicates an enormous appreciation and praise for the program and effort provided by all stakeholders that have been involved. Over the last eighteen months discussions surrounding cats have been largely positive, with advice and suggestions being implemented. The general feeling now is the public are no longer "hiding" their owned or semi owned cats, rather asking for assistance and guidance. Overall, I think there has been a major dent made in the number of cats within the Shire. I have not had one person ring to ask about surrendering litters this season which was quite a regular occurrence."*

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

See above at (e).

In addition, RSPCA NSW is concerned that cat containment measures are likely to lead to increased abandonment of cats, increased numbers or requests for surrenders, lower rates of adoption and higher euthanasia rates.

Due to existing pressure to reduce euthanasia and costs within the pound system, many councils already refuse cat surrenders. RSPCA NSW believes that such behaviour will continue, leading to more cats being abandoned and contributing to growing populations of unowned domestic cats and/or increased pressure on animal welfare organisations and rescue organisations.

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

In most cases there has been a failure to measure and/or report on the outcomes of cat containment policies where they have been implemented in Australia. While it is acknowledged that some outcomes are difficult to measure, such as wildlife impacts, it is critical that policy objectives are clearly defined, and evaluation methods are embedded prior to policy implementation.

The RSPCA position paper on cat containment describes the steps necessary to support positive outcomes associated with cat containment policies including identify what defines success and measuring and evaluating the extent to which this is achieved ("RSPCA Cat containment position paper," 2023).

Clause 5.8 of the position paper states:

Any decision to implement mandatory 24/7 cat containment must be preceded by a sufficient period of time to allow appropriate steps to be taken to mitigate the potential negative consequences of such a course. These efforts should be sufficiently resourced and ongoing during and after implementation. Such steps would include:

- Research to fully understand cat experiences and welfare in home environments and how to best minimise any negative impacts of containment in such environments.
- Provision of information to cat owners and prospective owners about the benefits of containment and how to provide an environment that meets the cat's physical and mental needs, allows the expression of normal feline behaviours, and promotes good health and welfare.
- The introduction and enforcement of mandatory identification requirements (if not already in place), with existing cat owners and semi-owners supported to meet those requirements (e.g. through community outreach and government subsidised microchipping and registration).
- Advance notification of the community of the changes to cat ownership requirements with sufficient lead time so cat owners can make the necessary plans to successfully contain a cat in an environment that meets the cat's physical and mental needs.
- Allowing time for roaming cats to be gradually transitioned to containment.
- Provision of support for financially disadvantaged owners and renters to assist with implementation of cat containment.
- Careful community messaging to guard against demonisation of cats, emphasising that there are legal and moral obligations to protect all cats from cruelty and harm and discouraging inappropriate behaviour towards free-roaming cats once legislation is implemented.
- Review of companion animal management legislation to permit and require councils to humanely manage stray and displaced cats.
- Amendment of legislation to require that persons trapping cats must be competent, trained, and operating as part of a program run by the government, or a welfare or research organisation that adheres to recognised welfare codes of practice and standard operating procedures. The organisation undertaking trapping is responsible for monitoring use and outcomes and these data should be publicly reported.

- Concerted and effective efforts to humanely reduce populations of unowned or semiowned cats ('stray' cats); e.g. through high-intensity targeted desexing and rehoming programs.
- Humane management of unowned or semi-owned cats including the development and support of innovative new humane solutions to problems associated with cat management.
- Consultation and planning to minimise negative impacts on organisations likely to bear the burden associated with increased cat impoundments due to active enforcement of mandatory cat containment.
- Adequate resourcing for shelters and pounds to prepare to provide appropriate housing for increased cat impoundments.
- Investment in research to monitor appropriate indicators of the potential positive or negative impacts of mandatory containment on cats, wildlife, and the community. Baseline and ongoing data should be collected to allow adequate monitoring of the policies.

(i) options for reducing the feral cat population

Whilst all cats in Australia belong to a single species (*Felis catus*), and migration between populations does occur in both directions, feral cats and unowned /semi-owned domestic cats differ in the way they interact (or do not interact) with people. Because of this, populations of feral cats require different management approaches than unowned and semi-owned domestic cats.

A feral cat is unowned and unsocialised, reproduces in the wild and has no relationship or dependence on humans. Feral cats cannot be rehomed. Feral cats are managed via the threat abatement plan (TAP) under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999* (EPBC).[9] The RSPCA urges states and territories to reject the proposed inclusion of unowned and semi-owned domestic cats as feral cats in the revised TAP. RSPCA NSW believes that feral cat management is a separate issue to the management of domestic cats by local government as it involves different stakeholders and requires different strategies (RSPCA Australia, 2023).

Feral cat populations are established across the Australian mainland and on many islands. Domestic and feral populations freely interbreed, and migration occurs between feral and domestic populations in both directions, especially on rural properties and the outskirts of rural townships. Even small rates of migration between populations will greatly reduce the efficacy of cat population management interventions (Miller et al., 2014). This necessitates that management of domestic cats be coordinated with interventions to manage feral cats within the same region to maximise the efficacy of both.

Control programs should not be undertaken unless impact evaluation in terms of clearly defined goals relating to native species conservation are monitored, reported and assessed. There is also a need to adopt relative humanness assessments for all methods to guide the appropriateness and impact of control options.

RSPCA Policy on the management of wild animals states that:

- Management programs must be aimed at reducing adverse impacts rather than simply reducing the number of animals, with evaluation of effectiveness reflecting this. The RSPCA opposes the use of incentive methods (such as bounty systems) where these focus on killing animals rather than reducing impacts.

- Management activities (such as on-ground intervention or control) should only be undertaken if it is likely that the aims of the program can be achieved. The methods used must be humane, undertaken by competent operators, target-specific, and effective.

It is not clear from the available evidence that lethal control methods for feral cats are effective in all cases (Lazenby et al., 2014).

Investment in research to establish humane and effective control techniques must be a priority. For example, the development of innocuous, easily distributed and administered contraceptive would be a great advancement for feline welfare.

(j) any other related matters.

The NSW *Companion Animals Act* 1998 limits the effective management of cats in NSW. It provides no definitive clarity as to obligations in relation to cat management. As a result, many councils interpret the legislation to conclude that they are not responsible for impounding cats brought to their facilities. The failure of councils to accept stray or surrendered cats, in their local government area, results in shelters, animal welfare organisations and veterinarians becoming overwhelmed with cats. Where charities don't exist to support cat management the consequence is likely high rates of cat abandonment.

In rural and remote areas, there is constant migration of cats onto rural properties and into townships as they disperse and seek food. These areas need ongoing access to surrender and desexing services to stop unowned cat populations exploding. In our experience, one unowned cat will reliably become a colony of 50 or more unowned cats within two years because of the very high reproductive success of cats when receiving supplementary food and shelter. We have also observed that newly arrived unowned cats are quickly noticed by members of the community who will act compassionately to provide them with food and shelter. Many people in this instance will also reach out to their councils for assistance. We have found that access to surrender and rehoming services is most successful in these instances when paired with community engagement and raising awareness of what to do when someone finds an unowned cat.

Recommendations:

1. Replace current cat management approaches in NSW with consistent, state-wide approaches that are evidence-based, funded, and incorporate appropriate monitoring and evaluation. The decades-long continuation of failed processes must stop.
2. Support large-scale, targeted desexing programs such as that provided through the KCSAH program. Large-scale targeted desexing programs have been proven to be effective in reducing the number of uncontained cats, nuisance complaints, shelter intake and euthanasia.
3. Continue and expand human behaviour change approaches such as that employed through KCSAH to encourage increased uptake of humane and welfare enhancing cat containment practices amongst cat owners. These campaigns are also important to support improved welfare of contained cats.

4. Reform the *NSW Companion Animals Act 1998* to require councils to assist their communities with unowned and lost or abandoned owned cats by collecting unowned cats when requested, and by providing accessible surrender and rehoming services.
5. Invest in research on appropriate indicators of the potential positive or negative impacts of mandatory containment on cats, wildlife, and the community.
6. Prioritise research on humane methods of feral cat control and adopt relative humanness matrix approaches to method selection.

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