

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Name suppressed
Date Received: 22 November 2024

Partially
Confidential

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The Chair
Animal Welfare Committee
NSW Legislative Council
By email: animal.welfare@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Madam

Re: Submission to the inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

is a wholly volunteer-run NSW based non-profit animal rescue charity committed to the rescue and rehoming of unwanted and neglected domestic animals including dogs, cats and horses.

We are writing to share our concerns regarding the current management of cat populations in New South Wales, and in particular to paragraphs (a), (b), (c), (d), (e), (f), (g) and (i) of the “Terms of Reference – Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales”. We respond using the numbered paragraphs as outlined in the Terms of Reference.

Paragraph (a)

As detailed in a CSIRO meta-analysis, cats are natural hunters and have an innate instinct to hunt amphibians, invertebrates, birds, mammals and reptiles¹. It has recently come to light that even well-fed Australian urban pet cats will hunt and kill animals due to their instinctual hunting behaviours, and that roaming pet cats kill 390 million animals per

¹ S. Legge, *et al.*, “We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife”, *Wildlife Research* 47(8) 523-539

year in Australia². The proportion of pet cats that spend time outdoors, as well as cats that are homeless (including those deemed 'feral'), have the greatest impact on threatened native animals due to their instinctual hunting behaviours. As noted in the CSIRO meta-analysis, pet cats, feral cats in the bush, and feral cats in towns kill millions of native animals each year. It isn't confined to a certain cohort of cats.

We note there are no definitions in the New South Wales legislation around the terminology for classifications of animals, in particular 'abandoned', 'feral', 'homeless', and 'stray' animals. We further note that there is no clear understanding in the New South Wales legislation surrounding 'semi-owned' cats (ie cats in colonies or other 'stray' cats that are fed and/or otherwise taken care of by someone who is not the registered owner). We recommend clear and concise definitions be included in amendment bills to the New South Wales legislation so that there is no ambiguity around classifications and ownership styles.

Paragraphs (b) & (c)

Current cat containment policies in New South Wales are virtually non-existent. There are some local councils that have curfew by-laws requiring pet cats to be locked indoors at night. This is neither a universal requirement across every local council in the State, nor is enforcement in the councils with the curfew by-laws widespread.

The welfare of cats in containment situations is definitely mixed. Some pet cats subject to curfews whose owners abide by their local council's by-laws actively look after their pet cat's health and wellbeing. Conversely, there are some pet cats with owners who abide by their local council's curfew by-laws who aren't able to adequately look after their pet's health and wellbeing, primarily due to the high costs of veterinary and preventative health care, and being able to provide quality food.

There are also volunteers of not-for-profit organisations and other concerned people who are trying to assist in the management of homeless cat colonies. These people have a mixture of aims, some of which include increasing the welfare of the colony cats, and in some cases, trapping the cats to have them desexed and then released to reduce the potential numbers in the colony. This is a difficult situation for the volunteers who are trying to assist the people who are feeding the colony cats as they also can come up

² Ibid. p531

against dissenting opinions in relation to having the animals desexed or otherwise interfered with, even if it is in the cats' best interests. There is also a considerable financial cost incurred by these volunteers and concerned people to get colony cats desexed and/or to have health checks.

There are many other cat colonies which are not assisted by such volunteers that are being fed by people in residential and industrial environments, some of which also trap and take some of the cats to veterinarians to be desexed and then released. Furthermore, some people are also able to trap, desex and rehome friendly colony cats, however, this is a rarity.

Paragraph (d)

Community education programs surrounding the desexing of cats to help keep cat numbers down and keeping them locked indoors at night to reduce the number of native animals being killed are clearly not effective. There simply wouldn't be homeless cats in urban environments if every newly adopted/sold cat was desexed prior to release to a new owner, and any cats found on the street were received into council pounds and shelters. The high financial cost of desexing of animals by private owners is a significant barrier for owners who have been educated to desex their animals but are unable to meet the costs of doing so.

Other responsible pet ownership initiatives such as lifetime registration and maintaining the pet registry records are only effective if the records are regularly maintained. There would be an increase in compliance if the pet registry records were updated by veterinarians when cats are brought into veterinarian clinics. Also, the current initiative of higher registration costs for not desexing cats over 4 months of age is ineffective when many veterinarians simply refuse to desex cats younger than 5 or 6 months old, and owners are unaware of the higher fees until it's too late (even after receiving advice from their veterinarians on a number of occasions).

Paragraph (e) & (g)

There absolutely will be large impacts for local councils to implement and enforce cat containment policies and they need to be adequately resourced to undertake these crucial tasks. Rescue organisations such as ours receive daily requests to take in

homeless cats after being turned away from local councils. The reasons given by the councils vary from it not being a problem because 'policies say that cats are allowed to roam' to 'not having the space in their shelters to take them in'. If the council shelters and pounds are to be required to take in homeless cats, they must also not be allowed to use excuses such as administrative burden, no space or costs. The council shelters and pounds using these excuses and turning away homeless cats is a massive contributor to the overpopulation of homeless cats, especially in urban environments. There are concerned people trying to do the right thing by calling the council shelters and pounds for help with abandoned and homeless cats but are forced to leave these cats where they are to fend for themselves and inevitably breed out of control as there is no one that can take them in.

The problem of homeless cats is further compounded by the simple fact that rescue organisations are not legally allowed to take in homeless cats that have microchips because they cannot be surrendered without their owner's consent. Even if the legislation was changed so that rescue organisations could receive homeless microchipped cats and hold them for a period of time before rehoming them, we are always at full capacity, if not over capacity.

Any further expansion and enforcement of cat containment measures would require the pound system to be adequately and appropriately resourced to ensure they are not using such excuses to turn away cats.

It is our position that nothing will change unless the council shelters and pounds are compelled to take in homeless cats and funded accordingly.

Paragraph (f)

The significant benefits of implementing effective large scale desexing programs are abundantly clear to every rescue organisation, veterinarian and volunteer. It might be seen to have negative impacts at first but the reduction of native animal loss due to hunting and the overall reduction of cat populations would have a significant impact on the cats as well as those who are on the frontlines – rescuers, veterinarians and volunteers. It has already been documented in the inquiry into pounds in New South Wales of the caring fatigue and burnout that those on the frontlines of cat rescue and management endure. It is these people who are attempting to fill the gap caused by the

absence of direct council assistance in cat management. They are underfunded and underappreciated by all levels of government for the significant emotional and financial burdens they continue to undergo with no abatement.

Whilst it would require significant funding for the provision of education and enforcement, there would be a clear net positive effect by reducing homeless cat numbers using trap, neuter and release techniques by approximately 30% after a median of 2.2 years³. The RSPCA's *Keeping Cats Safe at Home Impact Report*⁴ has shown how successful targeted desexing programs can be at engaging the community into action. Since 2013, Banyule Council in Victoria has provided free cat desexing for 'owned' and 'semi-owned' cats resulting in *"key findings of city-wide decreases in impoundments by 66%, euthanasia by 82%, and cat-related calls by 36% over 8 years, with savings to council of AU \$440,660 for an outlay of AU \$77,490"*⁵.

It is our position that any large scale desexing programs need to be fully accessible and equitable to everyone. For low/no income owners, this means the desexing fees will need be waived.

To be effective, large scale cat desexing programs would require adequate enforcement by councils.

Paragraph (i)

Any policies for reducing the feral cat populations that are devised and enacted **must** be safe for native animals. It is already clear that baiting feral cats in the outback has its drawbacks because some native animals also eat the poison baits.

It is our position that if large scale desexing and education programs are enacted, together with appropriate council enforcement and compelling council shelters and pounds to take in homeless cats, it is **absolutely** possible to manage and reduce the

³ Tan, K., *et al.*, "Trap-Neuter-Return Activities in Urban Stray Cat Colonies in Australia", *Animals* 2017, 7(6), 46

⁴ *Keeping Cats Safe at Home Impact Report*, December 2023, www.rspcansw.org.au/blog/animal-care-information/impact-report-2/ accessed 5:36pm on 20/11/2024

⁵ Cotterell, J., *et al.*, "Impact of a Local Government Funded Free Cat Sterilization Program for Owned and Semi-Owned Cats", *Animals* 2024, 14, 1615

overall cat population. It requires a multi-faceted approach to ensure all possible loopholes are minimised to ensure success.

With regards to urban feral cat management, we recommend requiring all breeders and sellers of cats (including rescues) to sell, rehome and adopt desexed cats only. It is also our recommendation that the veterinary industry must be required to desex cats at an early age where clinically safe to do so (ie by 8 weeks of age and/or 1kg in weight). There are some veterinarians in greater Sydney that refuse to desex cats under 5/6 months of age. This is simply unacceptable especially when early age desexing has been recommended by the RSPCA to occur “as soon as possible after reaching 1kg in weight and 8 weeks of age”⁶.

If every breeder and organisation can desex all cats prior to sale and release to new owners, the risk of homeless cats mating becomes zero. The cycle will be short circuited.

Yours faithfully,

⁶ RSPCA Australia research report, *Pre-pubertal desexing in cats*, June 2021