

**Submission
No 39**

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

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WILDLIFE
INFORMATION
RESCUE AND
EDUCATION
SERVICE

Submission:

Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

22 November 2024

Submitted to:

The Hon Emma Hurst MLC
Chair, Animal Welfare Committee

Executive Summary

The NSW government can and must do more to empower local government and the communities they serve to implement effective programs to mitigate the risks of harm from uncontained housed, free-roaming and free-living cats on wildlife. The *Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales* provides another opportunity for the government to do so. To reflect community expectations and shift to welfare-based approaches to cat containment, preventing additional births and reducing purposeful breeding, and significantly reducing the shockingly high numbers of healthy and treatable cats being euthanised.

Welfare-based approaches benefit local communities, including those who care about and for cats, and those who care about and for wildlife – who are often the same people, support the social and emotional wellbeing of staff in local government facilities, and reduce the cost burden on local government to manage current approaches. Reducing additional births and purposeful breeding of cats will reduce the risk of harm to wildlife, reduce the number coming into care, and the additional pressures faced by the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

The status quo is not working and creating significant harm across the community. Small changes to legislation will empower local governments and other organisations to provide more effective programs for cats and the community, alongside remove legal barriers to welfare-based programs to care for cats and their wellbeing. The government can and must do more for everyone's benefit, including our unique and precious wildlife and those who care about and for them.



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About WIRES

WIRES is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation, and operates a dedicated Wildlife Rescue Office assisting wildlife and the community across Australia 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, providing rescue advice and assistance for around 150,000 animals annually – including 862 koalas in 2023. We have around 4,000 dedicated volunteers as well as a fleet of Wildlife Ambulances operated by full-time, professional Emergency Responders across NSW, South-East Queensland and Tasmania. These ambulances travel, on average, 43,000 kms per year and have responded to more than 17,000 rescues since October 2020.

In addition, WIRES trains hundreds of rescuers and carers annually, are dedicated to the ongoing recruitment of new volunteers and the continued training of existing volunteers. This growing network is critical for the rescue and rehabilitation of our unique native wildlife. WIRES has responded to more than 60% of all animals needing rescuing in NSW over the last 8 years. Across NSW the volunteer contribution is estimated to save the government more than \$27 million per annum and is growing.¹

WIRES has developed partnerships and programs and provides forward-thinking national support to hundreds of projects which aim to see listed species' populations increase through protection efforts. Since the 2019-2020 summer bushfires, we have had an increasing focus on supporting projects that protect and restore threatened habitats and provide for the long-term recovery of wildlife habitat and the preservation of native species in the wild.

¹ Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2020). *NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy 2020-2023*, NSW Government.



Introduction

NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Ltd (WIRES) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales* (the Inquiry) for the consideration of the NSW Parliament Animal Welfare Committee.

There are over 5 million housed and free roaming cats in Australia. Community concerns about impacts on wildlife and the safety and wellbeing of cats continue to increase. Expectations are that government at all levels will do more address these concerns. The Inquiry presents an opportunity to further discussions for policy and programme changes, with several opportunities to do so signposted in the Terms of Reference.

In addition, the Inquiry is well placed to re-centre decision-making to draw on evidence-based approaches to deliver on-ground benefits to wildlife through reducing the risk of harm to wildlife from free-living, free-roaming and uncontained housed cats – and at the same time provide for improvements in the welfare and safety of cats.

Reducing the risk of harm to wildlife from cats in the community will reduce the burden on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and the dedicated volunteers in our communities.

The keeping of housed cats contained safely in the home is the most effective action that those who live with cat companions can take to protect wildlife and the improve the welfare and wellbeing of cats. Currently, NSW is an outlier, being only one of two states which prevents local governments from introducing laws to contain housed cats.

Subsidised and mobile de-sexing services support communities, those caring for and about cats, and actively prevent additional births – including purposeful breeding. Expanded and accessible de-sexing services are effective at reducing the number of cats coming into local government facilities, associated costs, the shocking numbers of healthy and treatable cats who are euthanised, and the social and emotional wellbeing impacts on staff at these facilities.

In addition to subsidised, accessible and mobile de-sexing services to support communities, there is an abundance of evidence that Trap, Desex, Adopt or Return and Support (TDARS) programs provide for an effective long-term welfare-centred approach to prevent additional births and reduce the numbers of free-roaming and free-living cats in the community – directly improve outcomes for local wildlife, and reducing the burden on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

Legislative, policy and regulatory changes – alongside educational, indirect and direct financial support and assistance programs – underpinned by a welfare-centred approach will reduce the



risk of harm to wildlife from cats in the community. Such an approach reflects community expectations for appropriate and effective actions from government.

Focus of this submission

WIRES submission highlights evidence-based approaches which deliver on-ground benefits for wildlife and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector via directly reducing the risk of harm to wildlife posed by uncontained housed, free-roaming and free-living cats. Welfare-centred approaches also improve the safety and wellbeing of cats, provide long-term and cost-effective measures, and reflect community expectations.

Uncontained housed cats and free-roaming cats in urban areas, peri-urban areas, and around farm buildings have the most impact on wildlife and are the primary focus of this submission.

These evidenced-based approaches can also be applied to reduce the impacts of free-living cats, which are those cats who are primarily away from and unconstrained by people and communities.

Terminology

The following terminology is adopted in WIRES submissions to more-clearly define the different situations cats are living in and with, and to determine effective approaches to minimise how these can differently impact wildlife:

- Housed cats – cats who are kept and fed at a person’s home and are directly cared for by a single person or family.
- Uncontained housed cats – housed cats who are allowed and enabled to roam relatively freely in their community.
- Free-roaming cats – cats who are unhoused and may be fed by one or more persons in the community, primarily in urban and peri-urban areas.
- Free-living cats – cats who live freely in and outside peri-urban areas, primarily away from and unconstrained by people and communities.



Reducing impacts

Uncontained housed, free-roaming and free-living cats can have a substantive impact on wildlife and increase pressures on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. It is, however, imperative to note that habitat destruction and fragmentation is the key threat faced by wildlife across NSW. In addition, habitat destruction and fragmentation increase the risk of impact of cats in wildlife. In short, management of cats must be undertaken as part of a suite of measures to reduce the impacts we are having on wildlife.

Uncontained housed and free-roaming cats are present in significantly higher densities in urban and peri-urban areas, with a corresponding higher risk to wildlife and additional pressures on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and the veterinary professionals who provide medical care for sick and injured wildlife.

Being able to roam also exposes cats to significant risk of harm, with a lower life expectancy than housed cats.

The RSCPA notes that “Cats who roam away from home risk being hit by cars, attacked by dogs, getting in fights with other cats, contracting infectious diseases and getting lost or stolen.”

Those kept safely at home live up to 10 years longer.²

Alongside reducing the number of cats able to roam (cat containment programs), preventing additional births of free-roaming and free-living cats is a critical measure to reduce the risk of harm to wildlife from cats in the community. Alongside free and subsidised accessible and mobile desexing programs, wildlife- and welfare-focussed Trap, Desex, Adopt or Return and Support (TDARS) programs provide a well-known approach to preventing additional births, their impacts on wildlife and support the community. TDARS programs also reduce the burden on local government programs and facilities, the shocking numbers of healthy cats euthanised, and the social and emotional wellbeing impacts on staff who work in these facilities.

The status quo is sowing distrust and increasing impacts

The forced euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats has fostered distrust amongst those who care for cats in their communities, as well as those with housed and uncontained housed cats.

² RSPCA NSW (no date), Keeping cats safe at home, For cat lovers, <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/keeping-cats-safe/cat-lovers-2>



There is evidence that cats can be released to roam freely rather than being surrendered to local government facilities due to the actual (and perceived) high rates of euthanasia of healthy and treatable individuals. Alongside a direct increased risk to wildlife of these cats becoming free-roaming, there is a corresponding increase in additional births leading to increases in local cat populations.³

The status quo is not working.

Current approaches are increasing the risk of harm to wildlife, placing additional pressures on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and veterinary professionals, and further impacting those who care about cats in the community.

In addition, costs and pressures on local government facilities are increasing, with high numbers euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats significantly impacting the social and emotional wellbeing of staff in these facilities.

Cat containment

The *Companion Animals Act 1998* (NSW) limits the ability of local governments to set policies to regulate uncontained house cats and free-roaming cats, which presents significant and ongoing challenges and risks. These challenges and risks encompass cat welfare (including disease spread), additional births, and the risk of harm of cats on wildlife in their respective communities.

A change to the Act would enable and empower local government to implement policies and programs designed to address these impacts for the benefit of the entire community – those who care about and for cats, and those who care about and for wildlife. It is important for the Inquiry to note that these are often the same people.

Cat containment policies and programs will also reduce the number of healthy and treatable cats euthanised in local government facilities, improving the social and emotional wellbeing of staff.

³ Scotney, R., Rand, J., Rohlf, V., Hayward, A., Bennett, P. (2023). The Impact of Lethal, Enforcement-Centred Cat Management on Human Wellbeing: Exploring Lived Experiences of Cat Carers Affected by Cat Culling at the Port of Newcastle. *Animals*, 13, 27



The negative physical and psychological impacts on staff are well-documented in Australia and other western countries — including devastatingly higher recorded rates of suicide.⁴

Alongside enabling and empowering local government, the NSW government can further support awareness raising and understanding of the widespread benefits of cat containment within and across communities. The RSPCA's *Keeping Cats Safe at Home* program already provides resources to draw on.

Additional assistance should be made available for individuals and families with older cats to transition to containment.

Preventing additional births

Alongside preventing cats from being able to roam freely in the community, reducing additional births is fundamental to mitigating the risk of harm to wildlife. Risks which increase pressure on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, veterinary professionals, and the broader the community.

Preventing additional births requires an array of approaches including access to free and subsidised, accessible and mobile desexing services for those caring for housed cats, uncontained housed cats and free-roaming cats.

A direct benefit is a reduction in the number of surrendered cats and the potential for more free-roaming and free-living cats in the community. The reduction in the number of cats in local government facilities, will improve the social and emotional wellbeing of staff and lower associated costs on local government.

Preventing additional births will reduce the risk of harm to wildlife and reduce the burden on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

⁴ Bartram, D. J., Baldwin, D. S. (2010) Veterinary Surgeons and Suicide: A Structured Review of Possible Influences on Increased Risk. *Vet Record* 166, 388–397. Rogelberg, S. G., DiGiacomo, N., Reeve, C. L., Spitzmüller, C., Clark, O. L., Teeter, L., Walker, A. G., Carter, N. T., Starling, P. G. (2007). What Shelters Can Do About Euthanasia-Related Stress: An Examination of Recommendations from Those on the Front Line. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 10, 331–347. Andrukonis, A., Hall, N. J., Protopopova, A.(2020). The Impact of Caring and Killing on Physiological and Psychometric Measures of Stress in Animal Shelter Employees: A Pilot Study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 9196.



Reducing purposeful breeding

Effectively reducing a substantive source of additional births requires a strategy to restrict purposefully breeding cats until the number of cats in local government facilities and shelters trends towards zero, and the euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats has ceased.

Victoria has provided leadership, ensuring that the only cats sold through pet shops are from rescue operations, through changes to the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* (Victoria).

Implementing similar legislative changes in NSW will directly reduce the risk of harm to wildlife, and improve the welfare and wellbeing of cats, through reducing purposeful breeding.

Trap, Desex, Adopt or Return and Support

Reducing additional births of free-roaming and free-living cats is achievable with wildlife- and welfare-focussed Trap, Desex, Adopt or Return and Support (TDARS) programs in communities.

Changes to legislation are necessary to support TDARS programs and ensure they are effective – reflecting the abundance of evidence-based research in Australia and internationally of their potential.⁵

⁵ Crawford *et al.* (2023). Solutions-Based Approach to Urban Cat Management—Case Studies of a One Welfare Approach to Urban Cat Management, *Animals* 13(21), 3423. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13213423>. Scotney *et al.* (2023). The Impact of Lethal, Enforcement-Centred Cat Management on Human Wellbeing: Exploring Lived Experiences of Cat Carers Affected by Cat Culling at the Port of Newcastle, *Animals* 13(2), 271, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13020271>. Debrot *et al.* (2022). A renewed call for conservation leadership 10 years further in the feral cat Trap-Neuter-Return debate and new opportunities for constructive dialogue, *Conservation Science and Practice* 4, e12641, <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.12641>. Gunther *et al.* (2022). Reduction of free-roaming cat population requires high-intensity neutering in spatial contiguity to mitigate compensatory effects, *PNAS* 119(15), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2119000119>. Kennedy *et al.* (2020). Global Strategies for Population Management of Domestic Cats (*Felis catus*): A Systematic Review to Inform Best Practice Management for Remote Indigenous Communities in Australia, *Animals* 10(4), 663. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10040663>. Spehar & Wolf (2020). The Impact of Targeted Trap-Neuter-Return Efforts in the San Francisco Bay Area, *Animals* 10(11), 2089. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10112089>. Wolf *et al.* (2019). Reply to Crawford *et al.*: Why Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) Is an Ethical Solution for Stray Cat Management, *Animals* 9(9), 689. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9090689>. Zito *et al.* (2018). Assessment of a Targeted Trap-Neuter-Return Pilot Study in Auckland, New Zealand, *Animals* 8(5), 73. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani8050073>. Spehar & Wolf (2018). A Case Study in Citizen Science: The Effectiveness of a Trap-Neuter-Return Program in a Chicago Neighborhood, *Animals* 8(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani8010014>. Swarbrick and Rand (2018). Application of a Protocol Based on Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) to Manage Unowned Urban Cats on an Australian University Campus, *Animals* 8(5), 77. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani8050077>. See also, Alex Greenwich, second reading speech, *Animal Welfare (Population Control Programs) Bill 2014*, 11 September 2014. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/bills/Pages/bill-details.aspx?pk=2821>



Currently, members of the community who are providing care for free-roaming and free-living cats, including through TDARS programs, can be charged with an offence under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (NSW) and potentially other legislation.

Whereas Victoria has provided leadership on reducing the purposeful breeding of cats, Independent MP Alex Greenwich introduced the *Animal Welfare (Population Control Programs) Bill 2014* as a private members bill to address impediments in NSW to reduce the risk of harm to wildlife, improve cat welfare and safety, and support communities to care for cats. The Bill – with the long title of *An Act to facilitate programs for controlling the population of stray, abandoned or wild cats or other non-native animals by providing immunity from civil liability and exemptions from licensing and other requirements; and for other purposes* – empowers local government authorities and other sponsoring agencies to legally implement TDARS programs to care for community cats and reduce the risk of harm to wildlife.⁶

As noted in Mr Greenwich’s private members bill, TDARS adopts a welfare-based approach and has broad community support. Such programs directly reduce cat populations, and the number of animals managed and euthanised by local government facilities – including healthy and treatable cats – with positive impacts on the social and emotional wellbeing staff in animal care facilities and for those who care for cats in the community.⁷

Revisiting Mr Greenwich’s lapsed private members bill will further enable the government to recognise the contribution to cat welfare made by un- and under-funded grassroots, volunteer-based charities and organisations – and reduce the risk of harm to wildlife.

An education focussed approach

Changes to legislation to support and empower TDARS programs which empower local governments to implement cat containment policies and processes, alongside access to free and subsidised, accessible and mobile desexing services must be supported by an education-based approach to ensure their effectiveness.

An education-based approach will assist in fostering the social license for cat containment and programmes to prevent additional births, leading to more effective outcomes for the welfare of cats, the communities who care for them – and reduce the risk of harm to wildlife.

⁶ NSW Parliament (2014). *Animal Welfare (Population Control Programs) Bill 2014*, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/bills/Pages/bill-details.aspx?pk=2821>

⁷ Crawford, C., Rand, J., Rohlf, V., Scotney, R., and Bennett, P. (2023). Solutions-Based Approach to Urban Cat Management—Case Studies of a One Welfare Approach to Urban Cat Management. *Animals* 13, 3423. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13213423>



There is significant scope to draw on and learn from the experience with Victoria's implementation of s63AAB 'Offences as to sale or giving away of animals by pet shops' of the *Domestic Animals Act 1994*. In addition, Mr Greenwich's lapsed private members bill, built on broad community support, provides another example for the NSW government to consider.

Conclusion: Improved outcomes for wildlife, cats and communities

The *Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales* has significant potential to facilitate change. Changes in policy, processes and community awareness to reduce the risk of harm to wildlife, the unnecessary burden on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, improve the welfare and wellbeing of cats, and support the communities who care for them.

Supporting local government to implement cat containment, and empowering local government and other organisations to provide TDARS programs and restricting purposeful breeding, will significantly reduce the population of uncontained housed, free-reaming and free-living cats – and the risk of harm to wildlife.

Each of the relatively small changes to legislation, policy and processes outlined in WIRES submission reflect community expectations of government to act to reduce the risk of harm to wildlife, and to support the welfare and wellbeing of cats.

Community support will be further increased through an education-focussed approach, backed up by subsidised, accessible and mobile de-sexing services – each of which will contribute to broadening the social license for welfare-based programs.

These changes are required to enable and empower actions which will benefit those who care about and for cats, and those who care about and for wildlife – who are often the same people.

The status quo is not working and creating significant harm across the community. The government can and must do more for everyone's benefit, including our unique and precious wildlife and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector who cares for them.



Recommendations

1. Amend the *Companion Animals Act 1998* (NSW) to enable and empower local governments to pass cat containment laws.
2. Encourage and support local governments to develop their own companion animal management plans, working towards a consistent model across the state.
3. Support the development of state-wide resources and education programs for individuals and communities to understand the importance of keeping cats safely at home.
4. Provide funding to support free, subsidised, accessible and mobile desexing programs across NSW, and set a timeframe for desexing of cats to be mandatory.
5. Empower local government and other organisations to develop TDARS programs, including necessary changes to the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (NSW) and other legislation, drawing on Mr Greenwich's lapsed private members bill – the *Animal Welfare (Population Control Programs) Bill 2014*.
6. Make necessary legislative changes to bring NSW into line with Victoria and their implementation of s63AAB 'Offences as to sale or giving away of animals by pet shops' of the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* to regulate purposeful breeding to reduce population numbers and the risk to wildlife.

Yours sincerely,

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