

Submission
No 94

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Management of Cat Populations in New South Wales

NSW Government submission to the inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW

December 2024

Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure acknowledges that it stands on Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land, and we show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work, seeking to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically.

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Contents

Executive summary	4
Regulatory framework and tools	5
Summary of key issues.....	9
Programs and education to address identified issues.....	13
Key stakeholders.....	15
Companion animal data	16
Conclusion	17

Executive summary

The NSW Government welcomes the Parliamentary Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales (NSW) and the opportunity to provide this submission. This submission outlines the current legislative framework governing the management of cats and the key issues impacting successful cat management in NSW.

With almost 1.2 million companion cats recorded on the NSW Pet Registry¹, it is evident that cats play a significant role in society and are integral to the lives of their owners. They can have a significant impact on people's health and wellbeing and deliver enjoyment and happiness to their owners and families.

However, managing cats in our communities in a way that provides for the protection of native wildlife and community amenity as well as ensuring high welfare standards for cats is challenging and complex. Any regulatory response must be feasible and not prohibitively expensive, for both owners and regulators.

In considering the management of cat populations in NSW it is important to recognise that there are several ways of categorising cats from a regulator's perspective. Along with owned cats, there are what are commonly referred to as stray or unowned cats, semi-owned cats and feral cats². Individual and targeted policy responses are required to address issues relating to each of these. As our understanding of cat populations is derived from ownership, we need to be aware of the potential of these cats to have an impact the ability to manage and contain cats, particularly where there is lack of clear owners.

There are various regulatory frameworks to manage cats in NSW, relating to companion cats, cat welfare and environmental protection.

The framework for managing companion animals in NSW, including cats, is underpinned by the principle of responsible pet ownership and the premise that animal welfare and management is a whole of community responsibility. If further measures are needed to influence owner perceptions and behaviour, this will take time to take effect and become normalised.

The concept of containing a cat is challenging with the high population of feral, unowned and semi-owned cats in NSW, as there is a lack of an owner to take responsibility to contain it. Where new containment requirements are introduced and there is an owner that can take responsibility, there are practical and costs issues to be resolved.

Where there is no owner, there needs to be consideration of whether funding or other mechanisms would be made available to enable collection of cats and the circumstances this could be done in.

- Collection and rehome, which creates implications to the operation of rehoming networks.
- Collection and neuter, which creates implications for animal welfare and resource effectiveness, or

¹ As of 5 November 2024.

² See 'Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia', RSPCA Australia, 2018.

- Collection and euthanise to reduce feral cat population, which have animal welfare concerns.

There is clear advice on the benefits of reducing predation on native fauna through the control of cat movements. However, regulating and enforcing the control of cats has economic, cultural, and practical difficulties while also raising potential animal welfare concerns. In 2020, the NSW Environmental Trust provided funding over four years for the NSW Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals NSW (RSPCA)'s Keeping Cats Safe at Home program to encourage and support cat owners to prevent their cats from roaming away from their properties both to keep cats safe and to protect native wildlife. This is a key component of being a responsible cat owner.

The NSW Government is aware of growing calls to mandate cat containment and this submission outlines the issues that will need to be resolved if such a position is supported.

Unowned cats and those described as semi-owned, which are fed but not owned by members of the community, are a practical issue that makes containment problematic. A specific strategy is required to address the current unowned cat population and mitigate the negative impacts they have on the environment and neighbourhoods, and that also considers the health and welfare of these cats. The NSW Government looks forward to the Committee's findings in respect to this complex issue.

Feral cats are a major threat to biodiversity and predation by feral cats is listed as a key threatening process under NSW and Commonwealth legislation. Regional pest management aims to minimise adverse impacts of pests on biodiversity, protected areas and the community. Specific management for the protection of threatened species is undertaken through the *Saving our Species* program, including and together with actions to manage feral cats within the National Parks estate. Predation by cats should be considered in the context of predation by other invasive predators.

Ultimately, the goal of the NSW legislative and regulatory framework in relation to cats is to embed responsible pet ownership, protect native wildlife, foster community amenity and promote the welfare of animals. The framework must navigate conflicting priorities and varying regulatory approaches. Responsible pet ownership specifically addresses the control of owned cats, distinguishing them from unowned or feral cats. Effective feral pest management necessitates reducing the number of feral cats.

Regulatory framework and tools

Cats can be broadly categorised as companion or owned cats, unowned cats and feral cats. The various regulatory frameworks to manage cats in NSW relate to responsible ownership, cat welfare and environmental protection.

The NSW legislative framework in relation to cats includes:

- as companion animals (*Companion Animals Act 1998*)
- as animals that are protected to ensure their welfare (*Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* and *Crimes Act 1900*)

- as animals that are a potential source of risk to the natural environment and native wildlife (*Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016, National Parks, Wildlife Act 1974, Biosecurity Act 2015, Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002 and Land Services Act 2013*).

Companion Animals Act 1998

In NSW the management of companion cats is primarily governed by the *Companion Animals Act 1998* (CA Act) and Companion Animals Regulation 2018. The principal object of the CA Act is to provide for the effective and responsible care and management of companion animals. The CA Act also states that the protection of native birds and animals is an objective of animal welfare policy in NSW. Some key provisions under this legislative framework include:

- **identification and registration** – cats must be microchipped and registered on the NSW Pet Registry
- **desexing** – early age desexing is encouraged in NSW through the additional cost of an annual permit fee if an owner does not desex their cat by the time it reaches 4 months of age. This is legislated to help reduce unwanted litters, improving the health and welfare of cats as well as significantly reducing euthanasia rates and costs to pounds and shelters
- **enforcement** – NSW councils are responsible for enforcing the CA laws which includes managing roaming, nuisance, seized and surrendered cats, ensuring compliance with identification and registration requirements, and overseeing rehoming efforts.

Companion animal laws govern the ownership and management of companion animals in NSW. They set out the concepts of responsible pet ownership and the penalties where those concepts are not met. Registration is a component of responsible pet ownership to ensure there is a fast and effective way to identify and reunite lost pets with their owners. This ensures owners can take responsibility for the care and welfare of the animal as well as any action taken by the companion animal.

In the context of cats, the CA Act does not provide an offence for a cat to stray beyond its owner's property, nor does it require a cat to be prevented from roaming as dogs are. Under the CA Act, cats are only prohibited from food preparation/consumption areas and wildlife protection areas. Consequently, councils' powers are limited in seizing roaming cats.

Nuisance orders

Under the CA Act councils can issue a nuisance order to address roaming cats. To impose a nuisance order a council must be satisfied that a cat:

- makes a noise that persistently occurs or continues to such a degree or extent that it unreasonably interferes with the peace, comfort or convenience of any person in any other premises
- repeatedly damages anything outside the property where it is ordinarily kept.

Nuisance orders remain in force for 6 months and specify the behaviour of the cat that must be prevented. Owners can be fined each time they fail to comply with the order. Seven cat nuisance orders were issued in the 2023-2024 financial year.

Members of the public can also take action under the CA Act in 2 situations:

- where the cat is in a public place prohibited under the Act (food preparation/consumption areas or wildlife protection areas) (section 30)

- where it is reasonable and necessary for the protection of any person or animal (except for vermin) from injury or death (section 32).

These seizures must adhere to animal welfare laws and a seized animal must be delivered to its owner, a council pound or other approved premises, such as the Animal Welfare League NSW (AWL), the Cat Protection Society of NSW, and the RSPCA NSW, as soon as possible.

Some NSW councils have introduced cat management strategies by using environmental planning laws, such as planning agreements and/or conditions attached to development consents, to either impose controls or prohibit the ownership of cats. In these cases, it is a breach of planning approval for certain pets to be present, or to be allowed to roam freely, with enforcement on the land owner.

Microchipping

Under the companion animal legislative framework, breeders are required to microchip cats before they are sold or given away or by 12 weeks of age, whichever occurs first. A vet or authorised identifier can perform the microchipping procedure and must record the cat owner's details with the microchip number on the NSW Pet Registry. Penalties apply if this requirement is not met. The microchipping system for companion animals in NSW helps to ensure a permanent form of identification to safeguard cats and dogs and assist with reuniting pets when they become lost.

Registration

All cats are required to be registered before being sold or given away or by 12 weeks of age, whichever occurs first. This involves the owner either visiting their local council or creating a profile on the online NSW Pet Registry that links the microchip and ownership details and enables payment of the base registration fee. Penalties and late fees apply if this requirement is not met. Cat registration helps keep ownership details up to date and contributes to council costs of managing of companion animals in the community.

Annual permit fee

Cats that are not desexed by 4 months of age require a permit in NSW, unless they are exempted. The owner of a cat that is not desexed is required to pay this fee annually from when the cat reaches 4 months of age. Penalties and late fees apply if this requirement is not met. Exemptions apply for a cat kept by a recognised breeder for breeding purposes or if a veterinary practitioner has specified in writing that a cat cannot be desexed for health reasons. Exemptions also apply to council pounds, Animal Welfare League NSW, the Cat Protection Society of NSW, and RSPCA NSW. Once the cat is desexed, there is no requirement to renew the annual permit.

Acceptance of cats at council pounds

A council must accept at its pound a cat that has been lawfully seized under the CA Act and which has been detained at an approved premises and not claimed after 72 hours following its delivery to the approved premises. The CA Act does not specifically direct a council pound to accept any cat from a member of the public even if it was lawfully seized. However, at least in the case of a cat that has been lawfully seized, there is a reasonable expectation that a council, in properly exercising its functions, should accept the animal at the council pound or at least have an arrangement with an approved animal welfare organisation to accept such an animal.

The Companion Animals Register (CAR) and NSW Pet Registry

Councils play a significant role in promoting and overseeing responsible ownership of companion animals in their local area. The CAR is a statewide register of pet dogs and cats and is a key regulatory tool used by councils when undertaking their companion animal management responsibilities.

The NSW Pet Registry is a public-facing online portal that is linked to the CAR database, allowing cat and dog breeders and owners to register their pet cats and dogs, add litters, update contact information, report their pet missing and pay applicable registration and annual permit fees without having to attend their local council in person. Veterinary practitioners and authorised identifiers can access it to identify animals and update pet details. Veterinary practitioners can also update a companion animal's desexed status and list them as missing or deceased.

Companion animal breeders, owners, councils, veterinary practitioners, authorised identifiers, other state agencies, NSW Cat Protection Society, Animal Welfare League NSW and RSPCA NSW all have varying levels of access to the CAR and/or NSW Pet Registry to help support responsible pet ownership and enforce compliance with CA laws.

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979

The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (POCTAA), the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulation 2012* and supporting codes and standards play a role in ensuring the welfare of all animals, including cats. These instruments set out the standards for the treatment of animals and penalties for cruelty and failure to provide food, drink and shelter, including for cats. The Act is administered by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD), although it falls under the authority of both the Minister for Agriculture and the Minister for Local Government. Enforcement of POCTAA is carried out by inspectors appointed from RSPCA NSW, Animal Welfare League NSW, Greyhound Welfare Integrity Commission, and NSW Police.

National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has responsibilities under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* to protect biodiversity and other values of national parks and reserves. This includes taking specific actions to protect declared assets of intergenerational significance. Cats are identified as a key risk in 21 published conservation action plans for areas in national parks that are declared as assets of intergenerational significance.

Biosecurity Act 2015 (NSW)

The *Biosecurity Act 2015* places a general biosecurity duty on everyone in NSW who deals with pest animals. Statewide controls for specific pests are captured in the Act and the *Biosecurity Regulation 2017*. A series of Codes of Practice and Standard Operating Procedures have been published to provide guidance in the control of pest animals, including for feral cats.

Regional implementation of the Act is supported by Regional Strategic Pest Animal Management Plans, which operate as a sub-plan to the local strategic plans under the *Local Land Services Act 2013*. Feral cats are identified under all these plans as a priority pest species.

Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016

Predation by feral cats is listed as a key threatening process under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (and also under Commonwealth law) and a threat abatement plan is in place.

The Biodiversity Conservation Act does not require the development of strategies to minimise the impacts of key threatening processes. However, due to the large number of species affected by feral cats, the Department of Climate Change, the Environment, Energy and Water (DCCEEW) is preparing a strategy to guide alignment of strategic prevention and research actions.

Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002

Game and feral animal hunting in NSW is regulated under the *Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002*. This Act lists the animals that may be hunted in NSW and includes feral cats.

Summary of key issues

The regulation and management of cats has been subject to several inquiries and reviews in NSW. Consistent issues and policy tension points have emerged. These recurrent challenges highlight the complexities involved in balancing effective cat management, animal welfare, and the protection of native wildlife. Examining these key issues to develop effective strategies is crucial for fostering a harmonious coexistence between cats, key stakeholders, the environment and the broader community.

Desexing

Desexing cats has health benefits and is the most effective way to reduce the number of unwanted stray and semi-owned cats. Desexing reduces the potential for problems associated with cats in communities and would reduce the number of cats in pounds and rehoming organisations.

There are several policy measures that include desexing cats as a solution to the issues caused by cats. These include:

- **mandatory desexing** was found by the NSW Companion Animals Taskforce³ to not be widely supported in Australian research. Mandatory desexing legislation for cats would require amending the CA Act to include a requirement and offence provision for mandating desexing of cats in NSW. There needs to be consideration on how effective mandating desexing could be given difficulties in enforcement and the risk of discouraging owners to register their animal to avoid the requirement.
- **targeted desexing programs.** This could include programs that target areas with high cat populations, low socio-economic status, high pound intakes and high numbers of semi-owned or unowned cat populations. The aim of targeted desexing is to help reduce reproduction and overpopulation
- **early-age desexing** is encouraged in NSW to prevent unwanted litters and assist with cat management. Cats should be desexed prior to 4-months of age to prevent first litters. This is supported under NSW legislation through annual permit fees for un-desexed cats

³ [Companion Animals Taskforce](#)

- **trap-neuter-release** programs do not have agreed efficacy due to concerns from existing research and program evaluations over effectiveness. There is also legal uncertainty over whether the abandonment of an animal post procedure is a breach under section 11 of POCTAA.

Compliance and enforcement of any mandated cat desexing measures may be challenging for several reasons:

- mandated cat desexing programs need to be coordinated and proactive noting that councils and animal welfare organisations often face resource limitations, making it difficult to monitor and enforce desexing regulations effectively.
- the cost of desexing procedures can be a barrier for some pet owners. Offering subsidies or affordable options for communities can also be a cost implication for veterinary businesses, governments and welfare organisations
- the identified veterinary workforce shortage in NSW may also impact the availability of desexing services.

Cat containment/curfews

There are growing calls from some stakeholders for owned cats to be treated the same as owned dogs in that they should not be free to roam outside their owner's property. Mandated 24-hour cat containment, or at least night curfews, is one measure being proposed by some to reduce cats from wandering outside their property and causing associated issues such as nuisance and wildlife predation. It has also been suggested as a measure to protect cats from harm. It is important to note, cat containment policies are suited to owned cats, that is those cats that have an owner willing and able to implement containment, as well as the capability to safely and humanely contain their cat.

The recently published Natural Resources Commission (NRC) preliminary report into NSW Invasive Species Management - Reducing Risk, Securing the Future NSW Invasive Species Management Review Preliminary Report August 2024 recommends amending the CA Act to enable councils to introduce cat containment policies to improve biosecurity outcomes.

The main issues that mandating cat containment presents are:

- **enforcement:** enforcing mandated 24-hour cat containment can be challenging due to the difficulty of capturing cats that breach containment regulations. This process typically requires trapping the cats, allocating additional resources to regularly check the traps to ensure welfare standards are met, and then reuniting or rehoming the cats. Given that most cats entering the pound and rehoming system are unidentifiable, enforcement becomes nearly impossible as no owner can be identified
- **resource constraints:** enforcing cat containment can impose a significant resource burden on councils requiring them to collect, impound and potentially rehome or euthanise uncollected cats. Given the relatively low registration rates for cats compared to dogs, reuniting them with their owner could prove difficult. Semi-owned and unowned cats lack an owner to collect them, further complicating the issue. Pounds and approved charitable organisations may experience an increase in seized cats that do not have an identifiable owner. Additionally, some owners may be forced to surrender their cat if they do not have the ability or financial means to contain them

- **affordability and practicalities:** setting up cat enclosures or secure fencing can be expensive. This cost might be prohibitive for low-income earners or those with limited budgets, especially during a cost-of-living crisis. There is also the implications on renters. Rental agreements can prohibit pets or have strict conditions. Even with recent rental reforms for pets, landlords can still impose restrictions or require pet insurance to cover potential damages. These factors could have an impact on a person's ability to adopt or own a cat, potentially leading to an increase in surrenders to pounds and rehoming organisations
- **increased pressure on pounds and rehoming organisations:** mandatory cat containment laws could lead to an increase in the number of cats seized or surrendered. This would lead to subsequent pressure on pounds, shelters and rehoming organisations, with the potential for an increase in euthanasia rates due to cats not being able to be rehomed. Evidence shared during the Parliamentary Inquiry into pounds in NSW found that council pounds and rehoming organisations are already struggling under the burden of companion animals entering their facilities, predominantly cats
- **welfare and behavioural concerns:** mandated 24-hour cat containment policies may raise concerns relating to cat welfare and breaches of POCTAA. To enforce cat containment, there would need to be a program of trapping cats that are not currently contained. This would require specialist equipment and regular monitoring of the traps to ensure no breaches of animal cruelty laws, which would be a significant financial impact on councils, as the enforcement authority under the CA Act.
- **negative attitudes towards cats:** media articles often condemn cats and the role they play in the destruction of native fauna, without also mentioning the impacts of other invasive predators, such as red foxes, as well as roaming dogs. Any introduction of cat containment laws will need to take this into account to ensure such measures do not inadvertently contribute to this narrative.
- **influencing behaviour change:** changing owner behaviour is a long-term process, as evidenced by the time it has taken for the idea of dogs having to be kept confined to their owner's property to be normalised. It is also worth noting, according to RSPCA NSW, more than half of all cat owners in NSW already keep their cats safe at home⁴, meaning momentum is growing.

Cat management in pounds and shelters

The NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 8 - Customer Service's inquiry into pounds in NSW found NSW is facing an animal rehoming crisis, with council pounds and rescue organisations severely underfunded and over capacity⁵. The committee also found that council pounds rely heavily on rescue and rehoming organisations to rehome impounded animals.

Councils in NSW have different approaches to managing cats. Some do not impound cats or accept surrendered cats, for reasons including pound capacity, resourcing, cost and no kill policies. While this can reduce euthanasia rates and numbers in pounds in the short term it leads

⁴ <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/keeping-cats-safe/cat-lovers-2/>, accessed 28 November 2024.

⁵ [NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Pounds in NSW - Report](#)

to larger stray populations and issues in the longer term. There has been a recent downward trend in the number of cats entering pounds, from 20,432 in 2019/20 to 14,254 in 2023/24.

The NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Regional NSW's inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW found a flow-on impact on vets from councils refusing to accept animals from licensed veterinary clinics. The Committee recommended the legislation be amended to provide for this, together with ensuring consistent interpretation across all Local Government Areas.

The Centre for International Economics' Draft Report on the Rehoming of Companion Animals in NSW⁶, commissioned by the NSW Government, provides a summary of key cat management issues. These include high euthanasia rates for reasons including that many cats are unowned or not microchipped or registered and that there are a large number of urban strays entering pounds.

Environmental impacts

Management of owned and unowned cats

Predation by 'owned' and 'unowned' cats that roam and hunt is known to be driving declines in local populations of native species⁷. Strategies for reducing predation by cats in and around urban areas could have significant conservation benefits for local biodiversity.

Cat management strategies must recognise the different categories of cats, in particular the ownership element of being owned, semi-owned or a stray or colony cat when assessing their suitability, enforceability and effectiveness.

Feral cat management

Feral cats are present across the entirety of NSW, and are a persistent, ongoing, and critical threat to native wildlife and ecosystems. Complete eradication of feral cats using current management techniques is extremely unlikely. The effective control of feral predators, including cats, is essential to prevent the ongoing decline of native species and provide for the recovery of many of the most threatened species, especially mammals and ground-dwelling birds.

Predation by feral cats is listed as a key threatening process under both NSW and Commonwealth law and a national Threat Abatement Plan is in place under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. However, there is currently no broadscale, landscape-wide technique or strategy that will deliver effective feral cat control other than conservation fencing to establish large feral cat-free areas. Ongoing research and testing are needed to inform decision-making about the most effective and cost-efficient method of control for conservation.

Feral cat management is often conducted in conjunction with fox control measures. A recent review published by the CSIRO⁸ highlights that while research continues into improving efficacy of cat control and reducing welfare concerns, baiting, trapping, and shooting remain the most effective and humane options for cat control in Australia. Additionally, predator-proof fencing

⁶ [CIE Draft Report Rehoming of Companion Animals in NSW](#)

⁷ <https://www.publish.csiro.au/wr/pdf/WR19174>

⁸ [Dorph et al. 2024](#)

is used to isolate populations of threatened species from feral cat predation. A variety of approaches are needed across different land-use types to effectively control the threat.

The NSW Government has recently fulfilled its commitment to appoint an Independent Biosecurity Commissioner to provide advice to the Minister, other Ministers and the Government about issues related to pests and weeds in NSW. The Commissioner will consider the findings and recommendations of the Natural Resources Commission's review into NSW invasive species management.

Regional pest management strategies⁹ aim to minimise the adverse impacts of pests on biodiversity, protected areas and the community. Programs are developed and often carried out in collaboration with key stakeholders.

Programs and education to address identified issues

Responsible pet ownership education

The framework for companion animals in NSW is underpinned by the principle of responsible pet ownership and the premise that cat welfare and management is a whole of community responsibility. That means that everyone – pet owners, non-pet owners, councils, rehoming organisations, animal welfare organisations and government – has a role in ensuring the wellbeing of cats and the broader environment. This collective effort involves proper care and training by pet owners, support by non-pet owners through reporting and education, enforcement and resource provision by councils and government agencies and advocacy and education by rehoming and welfare organisations.

Improving responsible pet ownership is the Government's policy objective to address many of the challenges faced within the current system, including roaming cats, overbreeding, failure to desex and improving impounding rates and outcomes. Ensuring the health, well-being and proper care of companion animals throughout their lives is a crucial aspect of responsible pet ownership. This includes adhering to laws designed to prevent harm or nuisance, microchipping and registering cats, and providing necessary food, water, shelter and veterinary care. Cat owners should also invest in proper training and socialisation for their animals and be prepared for the lifelong commitment of pet care. The CA Act was introduced to encourage responsible pet ownership and address issues stemming from inadequate care. The legislation highlights the importance of pet owners managing and caring for their cats to prevent them from becoming a nuisance or posing a threat to wildlife.

Ultimately, the goal of the NSW legislative and regulatory companion animal framework is to minimise the number of cats entering pounds and shelters and ensure the best outcomes possible for all companion animals in NSW.

As well as providing information on owner and breeder responsibilities, including requirements and benefits of microchipping and registering a pet cat or dog, the NSW Pet Registry also provides information on the benefits of desexing, considerations before acquiring a pet, promotes adopting or otherwise identifying a reputable breeder.

⁹ [Regional pest management strategies](#)

Councils play a significant role in promoting and overseeing responsible ownership. To assist councils in this role the NSW Government has developed social media and collateral that include promoting desexing and the NSW Government's 'Adopt not Shop' strategy.

The NSW Government also recognises the valuable work of animal welfare organisations, in particular the NSW Cat Protection Society and refers people to its 'good neighbour' education materials.

Saving our Species program

The threat of feral cats is identified as a management priority for 38 threatened entities under the Saving our Species program¹⁰ including mammals, birds, reptiles and threatened ecological communities. This number only represents entities for which the control of feral cats is listed in their conservation strategies, where the threat is well-understood, and management has been deemed feasible and effective under the program. It is unlikely to reflect the overall scope and severity of the threat of feral cats in NSW.

Most of the management for feral cats under the Saving our Species program is focused on removing feral cats from sites where they directly impact species and ecosystems, given complete eradication is unlikely. Control methods include trapping, shooting, baiting, Felixer cat grooming trap trials and detection dogs to target trapping program.

Ongoing control of cats is key to securing the species from extinction in the wild. An example of a project where cat control has been successful is the Mountain Pygmy Possum Saving our Species project.

Environmental Trust grants

The NSW Environmental Trust has provided grants across a diverse range of programs relating to cat management and environmental protection. Recent cat grants include 'Developing Strategies for Effective Feral Cat Management' project and the 'Beyond Fencing' project, and the domestic cat program 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home'.

Feral cat management programs

There are a number of programs to manage feral cats. The NPWS Ecological Health Performance Scorecards program¹¹ is a recent large-scale feral cat monitoring program that measures and reports on the distribution and density of feral cats across eight identified sites.

A three-year \$8.5 million targeted feral cat control initiative focused on strategic control and monitoring has commenced, initially targeting larger reserves assessed to be the highest risk to threatened species from cat predation.

NPWS is establishing a network of feral predator-free areas across the NSW national parks estate where threatened native fauna can thrive in the absence of predation by feral cats, foxes and wild dogs.

¹⁰ [Saving our Species program](#)

¹¹ [NPWS Ecological Health Performance Scorecards program](#)

Key stakeholders

Given the complexity of the issue, there are multiple stakeholders within the NSW Government with responsibilities in this area, particularly:

- **Office of Local Government (OLG)** supports the administration of the CA Act and regulations. OLG is also responsible for strengthening the sustainability, performance, integrity, transparency and accountability of the local government sector in NSW. OLG work collaboratively with NSW's 128 local councils to deliver for their communities.
- **DPIRD** is responsible for administering the animal welfare regime in NSW through the POCTAA. DPIRD collaborates with RSPCA NSW and Animal Welfare League NSW who enforce compliance with POCTAA, including providing funding and supporting enforcement activities to protect animals, including companion cats, across NSW. DPIRD is the lead agency for invasive species policy in NSW and takes a lead role in managing invasive animal and plant species incursions and managing established pests under the NSW Biosecurity Act. DPIRD is also responsible for regulating and enforcing hunting, including for feral cats, under the Game and Feral Animal Control Act.
- **Local Land Services (LLS)** act as the interface between land managers and government across invasive species management. LLS builds the capacity of land manager groups to undertake pest animal management, including by providing advice and education on land manager obligations under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* and *Local Land Services Act 2013*. LLS and DPIRD share responsibility for promoting and enforcing compliance with pest animal management obligations under the Biosecurity Act. LLS also provides operational assistance during invasive species incursions and surveillance operations.
- **DCCEEW**, which includes the NPWS, conserves and protects the state's natural environment. It administers the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* and the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. This includes managing NSW national parks and undertaking feral animal control programs across the national parks estate (including in declared areas of intergenerational significance), and implementing threatened species conservation programs across all tenures.
- The independent **NSW Environmental Trust** was established under the *Environmental Trust Act 1998* and administers grants across a diverse range of programs.

Other key stakeholders within the NSW regulatory framework relating to cats include:

- **NSW councils** are the key enforcement authority under the CA Act. Councils are responsible for managing companion animals, which includes cats, in their local areas. Under the CA Act councils are given responsibilities and enforcement mechanisms to deal with breaches of the Act.
- **Veterinarians** in NSW are obliged to treat lost and stray animals. Strays are often delivered to a vet as the operator of an approved premise. Veterinarians are also required to perform microchipping procedures and can have responsibilities in entering data into the NSW Pet Registry.
- **Rehoming organisations** in NSW play a crucial role in caring for, treating, and rehoming rescued or unwanted companion animals. They can be designated under the CA Act, which infers responsibilities including record keeping and annual reporting, as well as financial incentives such as an exemption from the registration requirement for up to 12 months.

Council pounds are also required to work with rehoming organisations under the CA Act, to increase rehoming rates and reduce euthanasia of healthy companion animals.

- **Breeders** have a key role in ensuring responsible breeding practices are maintained.
- **Approved Charitable Organisations (ACOs)** under section 34B of POCTAA are responsible for compliance and enforcement functions of POCTAA. The ACOs include RSPCA NSW, Animal Welfare League NSW, Greyhound Welfare Integrity Commission, and NSW Police.

Companion animal data

The NSW Government has maintained a statewide CAR since 1998. To illustrate the size of the issue and to give an indication of the magnitude of the impact of any recommended regulatory reforms, the Committee may find the following statistics and trends useful.

Note that for cats to be listed on the CAR, they must be identified (microchipped).

Cat data on the NSW Companion Animals Register (CAR)	Total	Percent of total
Total number of cats listed on the CAR	1,190,033	
Total number of cats listed in the CAR that are registered	541,154	45.5%
Number of cats listed on the CAR that are desexed	663,699	55.8%
Number of cats listed on the CAR that are desexed and registered	525,430	44.2%

Table 1. Identified and registered cats in NSW as at 5 November 2024 (source: Companion Animals Register).

Identification (microchipping) and registration

It is important that cat owners identify and register their pet cat, as well as ensure that their details are kept up to date on the NSW Pet Registry. However, many pet cats that are microchipped are not registered, meaning that there is a chance that owner details are not up to date. This has implications when considering mandating regulatory measures such as containment, where pet cats found roaming will be difficult to reunite with their owners.

- Number of identified (microchipped) cats in NSW: **1,190,033**.
- Number of these identified cats that are also registered: **541,154**, or **45.5%**.

Cat owners that desex their cat are highly likely to also register them: **525,430** or **79.2%** of the total number of desexed cats listed on the CAR.

The proportion of cats that are registered versus only identified varies between local government areas (LGAs). For example, Central Coast Council has the highest number of identified cats in the state at **57,240** but **27,909** or **48.8%** of these pet cats are not registered.

Out of the top 20 LGAs according to identified cat population, this proportion of identified versus registered varies from **68.9%** of identified cats not registered in Liverpool LGA (**15,157** out of a total of **21,986** identified) to **2.8%** in Sutherland LGA (**699** out of a total of **24,769** identified).

Another consideration when assessing regulatory options is that the CA Act (section 7) recognises different classes of companion animal owners, not just registered owners, namely:

- the owner of the animal (in the sense of being the owner of the animal as personal property)
 - the person by whom the animal is ordinarily kept
-

- the registered owner of the animal.

Desexing

Early age desexing of cats has been a long-term policy objective of the NSW Government. While desexing rates have improved over the last 10 years, there is still room for improvement.

- In 2016/17, **51.73%** of microchipped cats were desexed. This rose to **97.06%** for those microchipped cats that were subsequently registered.
- In 2023/24, **62.86%** of microchipped cats were desexed. This rose to **94.10%** for those microchipped cats that were subsequently registered.

Pound data

Local councils report annually to OLG on certain information related to the operation of pounds, such as the number of incoming cats and dogs, the number reunited with their owner, rehomed or released to a rehoming organisation and the number euthanised. This information is published on the OLG website.

- A total of **14,254** cats either entered the pound system in 2023/24 or were already in the custody of a pound as of 1 July 2023 (one council did not report for 2023/24).
- **One hundred and thirteen** councils out of a total of **128** reported having cats in their pound facility at some point during 2023/24.
- **Blacktown City Council** reported the greatest number of cats during 2023/24 at **1047**.
- **Bogan Shire Council, Federation Council, and Ryde City Council** all recorded having 1 cat in their custody during 2023/24. Several more councils, including large metropolitan and regional councils, recorded fewer than **10** cats entering their facility during 2023/24.

Of the total number of cats entering a pound facility in 2023/24:

- 791 were returned to their owner
- 8,481 were rehomed or released to a rehoming organisation for rehoming.
- 3,549 were euthanised.

Conclusion

Addressing the complexity of cat management requires careful consideration of the policy implications on owners and communities alike.

Cat management strategies must recognise the different categories of cats when assessing their suitability, enforceability and effectiveness. The inter-relationship and objectives of all legislation must align for a cohesive and effective state-wide strategy.

While the NSW Government has similar broad policy objectives for the management of both cats and dogs - for effective and responsible care and management of companion animals and protection of native birds and animals - achieving the same progress against these objectives requires distinct approaches to reflect the specific characteristics of cat management.

The NSW Government has made several commitments relating to companion animals and animal welfare, to modernise the animal welfare framework in NSW, which includes a review of POCTAA, the CA Act and the establishment of an Independent Office of Animal Welfare. The

Government intends to review the consultation conducted to date and establish a new independent Office of Animal Welfare. The Government has also committed to review the CA Act to assess its suitability.

The NSW Government has commenced work on other commitments including \$12 million in funding to Sydney Dogs and Cats Home as part of a broader animal management and welfare plan to manage the growing number of lost, abandoned and neglected animals across the state.

There will be opportunities for stakeholders and the community to have their say on the shape of our state's animal welfare laws as this work progresses.

The Government will consider the Inquiry's findings and recommendations in formulating an effective path forward for cat management in NSW.