

Submission
No 187

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Dubbo Regional Council

Date Received: 22 November 2024

22 November 2024

Ms Emma Hurst MLC
Chair Animal Welfare Committee

Dear Ms Hurst

Upper House Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in New South Wales

Council welcomes the opportunity to provide its perspectives regarding the Upper House Inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW.

The following provides Council's responses in respect of the defined terms of reference of the Inquiry:

(a) The Impact of Cats on Threatened Native Animals in Metropolitan and Regional Settings

Evidence suggests that feral cats have been a primary contributor to the extinction of a range of species in Australia since 1770. It is also understood that feral cats pose serious and ongoing impacts to a range of native species.

Estimates from research studies have shown that feral cats hunt a significant number of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians annually across Australia. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service have previously estimated that 1.5 billion native animals are hunted annually by cats across Australia.

Cats generally have a lower impact in towns than bushland environments. This is owing to the fact that people in towns and settlements also provide food sources, whether intentionally or otherwise.

A radio tracking study undertaken in Adelaide in 2015 demonstrated that 39% of cats which their owners believed were contained at night were in fact roaming. It is further understood that a study undertaken in Lithgow in 2015/16 showed large ranges over which domestic cats can roam, with some animals travelling multiple kilometres daily in order to hunt in nearby bushland.

Pest Smart (a publication of the Centre for Invasive Species Innovation) in 2021 estimated the total pet cat population in Australia at 5.3 million with 1.6 million cats contained 24 hours/day (29% contained).



All communications to: **CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

ABN 53 539 070 928

PO Box 81 Dubbo NSW 2830

T (02) 6801 4000 **F** (02) 6801 4259 **E** council@dubbo.nsw.gov.au

Civic Administration Building Church St Dubbo NSW 2830

W dubbo.nsw.gov.au

In urban areas 'community cats' are also a known issue. These cats ordinarily have no owners, or the owners may not be known and the cats survive on food they find and/or food left out by the community.

(b) The Effectiveness of Cat Containment Policies including Potential Barriers

The Federal Government in 2020 conducted an Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats. A key recommendation of the Inquiry was for night time containment of cats to be made mandatory. This raises a range of significant enforcement and resourcing issues for Local Government and for legislators.

In Victoria for example, such laws are in place in respect of trespass and nuisance. These laws allow a Council to seize and impound a cat that wanders onto a property more than once. In addition, Councils can issue Orders and Fines for trespass to the owners (if known).

The Victorian example highlights a range of potential concerns for effective implementation of such a broad scale policy. This Legislation relies on enforcement by Local Government, which is generally not financially resourced to undertake such actions on a broad scale.

Council is supportive of cat containment, however, total reliance on Local Government is a significant financial and human resource impost on Council's and regulatory Staff. Cat containment must be considered as one management tool. It should not be considered in isolation and should be undertaken in conjunction with education programs, desexing programs and responsible pet ownership programs.

(c) Welfare Outcomes for Cats under Contained Conditions

It is considered that contained cats are less prone to injury and disease, lead longer lives, display reduced anti-social behaviours and are less prone to unwanted pregnancies.

Contained cats are also less likely to transmit or receive zoonotic diseases (diseases capable of crossing species barriers) to or from humans.

(d) The Effectiveness of Community Education Programs and Responsible Pet Ownership Initiatives

Dubbo Regional Council conducts healthy pet days where free microchipping is made available for cats and dogs. Council also undertakes social media posts around the need to register and microchip cats and dogs.

Any free microchipping and/or pet days Council ordinarily runs with community often average a 70/30 split between the number of dogs and cats microchipped.

It is considered that community education programs around responsible pet ownership and cat management need to be well funded and be over a sustained period. Local Government would benefit from further funding from State and Federal Government to both design and run sustained education campaigns across issues of responsible cat ownership, the need for microchipping and desexing.

(e) Implications for Local Councils in Implementing and Enforcing Cat Containment Policies

Any change to Legislation towards further cat containment policies, which are consistent with the outcomes of the Federal Government Inquiry in 2020 would provide significant resource and financial constraints on Local Government and be difficult to achieve measurable outcomes.

Any Legislative change should also be considered in the context of the benefits of suitable funding and resourcing for education, desexing and microchipping programs. This analysis may show that a legislation change in practical terms may not be as successful as ensuring appropriate funding and resourcing is in place for further education, desexing and microchipping programs.

(f) The Effectiveness and Benefits to Implementing Large Scale Cat Desexing Programs

It is considered that large scale desexing programs would be a great benefit to community and Local Government. However, any programs should be sustained over a period of time and be undertaken with responsible pet ownership programs. Whilst 'one off' programs are welcome, it is considered that a sustained program of assistance would be more beneficial in achieving long lasting outcomes.

(g) The Impact of Potential Cat Containment Measures on the Pound System

Over the last three years the Dubbo City Animal Shelter has handled some 2,216 dogs and cats on an annual basis. Council is currently undertaking the construction of a new Animal Shelter, which will have capacity for 100 dogs and 48 cats. This project has an overall cost of \$7.13 million.

Whilst the need for an up to date animal shelter is an important component of Council's regulatory functions and to ensure we can continue to meet welfare needs and reduce the incidence of disease, greater intervention needs to occur in the form of sustained education and management programs.

Our community has access to cat traps to facilitate the capture of cats that are not contained. The current demand for cat traps is more than Council has and a waitlist for traps is in place. Any cats caught in the traps are brought to the Animal Shelter. If the cat is not microchipped or registered, the owners are uncontactable. In these circumstances the cat becomes Council's responsibility to rehome or send to rescue which increases demands on staff time and resourcing.

(h) The Outcomes of Similar Policies on Cat Containment in Other Australian States or Territories

This term of reference has been discussed in other sections of Council's correspondence.

(i) Options for Reducing the Feral Cat Population.

Council considers that State Government Agencies such as Local Land Services are best placed to undertake programs around feral cat control. This is particularly important in the Regions where Local Land Services have particular functions in respect of livestock health, natural resource management, agricultural production and pest and insect control.

It is considered that the current resource allocations and financial environment for Local Government would not have the ability to be stretched any further to undertake such functions.

Council has a good understanding of the impact of the cat population on our native environment and recognises the need for further intervention to manage cat populations in NSW. However, it is considered that reliance on Legislation change only is unlikely to be successful as this would continue to place greater resource and financial burden on Local Government to deliver.

It is considered that management of the cat population needs to be led by Federal and State Government and should include education programs, desexing programs and responsible pet ownership programs.

If you require any further information and/or clarification of any points raised in Council's submission, please contact the undersigned on (02) 6801 4000.

Yours faithfully

Steven Jennings
Director Development and Environment