

Submission
No 175

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Country Women's Association of NSW

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Country Women's Association of NSW

*Incorporated in 1931 by an Act of NSW Parliament
Constituent Society of the Associated Country Women of the World*

ABN 82 318 909 926

21 November 2024

Committee Chair
Animal Welfare Committee
NSW Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
Submission via: animal.welfare@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

The Country Women's Association (CWA) of New South Wales (NSW) is the state's largest rural issues advocacy group with well over 8000 members and close to 400 branches across NSW. There is no other rural, regional, remote member-based organisation that has the breadth and depth of membership on matters affecting country people.

CWA of NSW aims to improve conditions for country women, children, and families by advocating for its members, helping local communities, creating a network of support and meeting together in towns and cities across NSW. The CWA of NSW advocates for positive action on a range of issues that impact the lives of women, children and families throughout NSW and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales (the Inquiry)*.

CWA OF NSW POLICY PRIORITIES

The CWA of NSW has a longstanding commitment to advocating on pest and feral animal management issues. CWA of NSW policies reflect the ongoing concern for the protection of agricultural environments and production, domestic animals and the preservation of native ecosystems and the importance of sustainable population control measures.

In recent years, the CWA of NSW has advocated for the classification of feral deer as a pest species, the prohibition of breeding or rehoming European Red Foxes, and supporting a comprehensive biosecurity approach on all land tenures, including National Parks. Additionally, the CWA of NSW has emphasised the importance of raising public awareness of biosecurity obligations among small landholders, urban farmers, and tourists.

In relation to the current inquiry into cat management, the CWA of NSW holds strong policy positions on the urgent need for state-wide cat containment measures and mandatory desexing of pet cats, as well as supporting efforts to control the feral cat population. These measures align with CWA of NSW broader objectives, aiming to protect agricultural environments and production, domestic animals and native wildlife from the devastating impacts of feral and roaming domestic cats.

CWA of NSW RESPONSE

The CWA of NSW strongly advocates for responsible cat management policies, supports the implementation of a state-wide cat curfew, containment, and mandatory desexing of pet cats. Additionally, CWA of NSW call

for effective strategies to control the feral cat population. CWA of NSW policies aim to protect native species from predation while also addressing public health and cat welfare concerns.

a) the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings:

Both domestic and feral cats pose a serious threat not only to Australia's native wildlife but also to agricultural production. Free-roaming domestic cats are estimated to kill an average of 186 animals per year, most of which are native species¹. Feral cats, however, have an even more devastating impact, responsible for the deaths of an estimated 1.5 billion native mammals, birds, reptiles, and frogs annually². This issue is not confined to rural areas—urban roaming cats also put significant pressure on local wildlife populations.

Cats, particularly feral cats, have been linked to the extinction of at least 33 native mammal species and are one of the most damaging invasive species to Australian wildlife³. Their impact extends beyond biodiversity loss, as feral cats also pose a significant risk to agricultural production. They threaten livestock, particularly sheep, by spreading diseases such as toxoplasmosis, leading to substantial economic losses. The combined estimated cost of their impact on human health and agriculture is approximately \$6 billion annually⁴.

Feral cats not only prey on native wildlife but also compete with other species for food and spread disease, making them a critical concern for both conservation and agricultural sectors.

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

Cat containment policies, such as curfews and enforced indoor living, exist in all Australian states except NSW and WA. Animal management legislation in Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia support local governments to create locally specific laws for pet containment⁵. Contained cats live healthier, longer lives, with reduced risk of injury, disease, and accidents. However, barriers to containment include a lack of legislative enforcement powers at the local level, and cultural resistance from cat owners who may be unaware of the environmental impact of free-roaming cats⁶.

NSW currently lacks the legislative framework to enable local councils to enforce cat containment, making it difficult to manage the problem effectively. Amending the Companion Animals Act 1998 to provide councils with the necessary powers is a critical step⁷.

(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions:

Cats kept indoors or in secure outdoor enclosures experience better welfare outcomes, including a longer lifespan and a lower risk of contracting diseases, being injured in fights, or being hit by vehicles. Research suggests contained cats live up to 10 years longer than their free-roaming counterparts⁸. Proper education for cat owners about the benefits of containment could further support the welfare of both the cats and

¹ Legge Sarah, Woinarski John C. Z., Dickman Chris R., Murphy Brett P., Woolley Leigh-Ann, Calver Mike C. (2020) We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife. *Wildlife Research* **47**, 523-539. [We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife](#)

² Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, n.d. Feral animals in Australia, Feral Cats, [Feral cats - DCCEEW](#) accessed 22.10.2024

³ Ibid

⁴ Legge Sarah, Taggart Pat L., Dickman Chris R., Read John L., Woinarski John C. Z. (2020) Cat-dependent diseases cost Australia AU\$6 billion per year through impacts on human health and livestock production. *Wildlife Research* **47**, 731-746. Cited In [The impact of roaming pet cats on Australian wildlife](#) accessed 22 October 2024

⁵ Biodiversity Council, Birdlife Australia, Invasive Species Council, June 2023, The impact of roaming pet cats on Australian wildlife Factsheet, accessed 21.10.2024, [The impact of roaming pet cats on Australian wildlife](#)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Biodiversity Council, Birdlife Australia, Invasive Species Council, June 2023, The impact of roaming pet cats on Australian wildlife Factsheet, accessed 21.10.2024, [The impact of roaming pet cats on Australian wildlife](#)

native wildlife.

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

Education programs, such as the "Keeping Cats Safe at Home" initiative, have successfully increased awareness of responsible cat ownership, encouraging owners to desex, microchip, and contain their cats⁹. However, to achieve broad success, these programs must be extended and adequately funded across all local government areas in NSW, focusing on behaviour change and compliance support¹⁰.

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

Local councils need additional resources to effectively implement and enforce cat containment policies. A statewide grant program, providing at least \$9 million over three years, could support local governments in employing rangers, enforcing curfew orders, and funding infrastructure like cat enclosures¹¹. Streamlining cat registration and identification processes would further alleviate administrative burdens¹².

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

Large-scale cat desexing programs are crucial for controlling both domestic and feral cat populations. Desexing reduces the number of unwanted kittens, lessening the pressure on the pound system and lowering the likelihood of stray cats contributing to feral populations¹³. Mandating desexing across NSW, with exemptions only for registered breeders, would mirror successful programs in other states and territories¹⁴.

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

Enforced containment measures and mandatory desexing are likely to reduce the number of stray and surrendered cats in the pound system. By reducing unplanned breeding and ensuring responsible ownership, pounds would experience less strain, allowing them to focus on rehoming efforts rather than dealing with stray or abandoned animals¹⁵.

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

In Victoria and the ACT, mandatory cat containment and desexing laws have seen positive outcomes in reducing both the environmental impact of roaming cats and improving cat welfare¹⁶. These laws have also shifted community norms towards more responsible cat ownership. NSW should look to these states as models for implementing similar measures, with appropriate public education campaigns to ensure widespread support.

(i) options for reducing the feral cat population:

The Australian Government's 2020 parliamentary inquiry into the impacts of feral and pet cats on native wildlife, which received bipartisan support, produced six key recommendations for the Australian Government. These included:

1. Recognising and prioritising the feral cat problem in Australia.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ National Feral Cat and Fox Management, n.d. Feral Cats, [Feral cats | National Feral Cat and Fox Management Coordination](#) accessed 22.10.2024

¹⁴ Biodiversity Council, Birdlife Australia, Invasive Species Council, June 2023, The impact of roaming pet cats on Australian wildlife Factsheet, accessed 21.10.2024, [The impact of roaming pet cats on Australian wildlife](#)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

2. Commissioning research on the impacts and management of both feral and pet cats.
3. Resetting current policies and planning responses to feral cat management.
4. Expanding predator-free fenced areas and establishing feral cat-free islands.
5. Developing in partnership with states and territories a clear strategy to manage stray and domestic cats.
6. Developing a governance framework to give effect to the strategies outlined in recommendations.

CWA of NSW highlights the importance of a nationally coordinated approach to domestic and feral cat management across Australia. This approach would help address key challenges, including navigating complex legislation, accessing effective control tools, and staying updated on best practices. A national approach has the potential to facilitate knowledge sharing, strategic planning, and the building of networks that empower landholders and communities.

Effective feral cat control requires a comprehensive approach, combining humane culling, habitat management, and public awareness campaigns. Tools such as baiting, trapping, and exclusion fencing are most successful when used together. However, the focus must extend beyond reducing feral cat numbers to minimising their environmental impact, particularly on biodiversity.

(j) any other related matters:

The CWA of NSW emphasises the importance of a nationally coordinated approach to managing both domestic and feral cats across Australia. A unified national strategy is urgently needed, including consistent definitions of cat categories across all jurisdictions. Standardising how domestic, stray, and feral cats are defined will help streamline management efforts, reduce public confusion, and clarify the responsibilities of pet owners and local councils.¹⁷.

CWA OF NSW RECOMMENDATIONS

The CWA of NSW appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry and strongly urges the NSW Government to adopt statewide cat management policies that include mandatory cat containment, desexing, and greater powers for local councils to enforce these measures.

- **Recommendation 1:** Amend the NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 to enable local governments to enforce anti-roaming laws for pet cats at a local level.
- **Recommendation 2:** Allocate a minimum of \$9 million to fund compliance, education, desexing, identification and registration programs.
- **Recommendation 3:** Encourage local governments to develop companion animal management plans.
- **Recommendation 4:** Develop a state-wide web resource for pet owners.
- **Recommendation 5:** Streamline pet identification and registration processes.
- **Recommendation 6:** Make desexing of pet cats mandatory state-wide.
- **Recommendation 7:** Support the recommendations arising from the Australian Government’s 2020 parliamentary inquiry into the impacts of feral and pet cats on native wildlife and work to achieve a nationally coordinated approach to managing domestic and feral cats across Australia.
- **Recommendation 8:** Ensure that the management feral cats in NSW complies with the National Code of Practice for the humane control of feral cats. Sharp T (2012) National Code of Practice for the humane control of feral cats. PestSmart website. <https://pestsmart.org.au/toolkit-resource/code-of-practice-feral-cats> accessed 21-10-2024

¹⁷ National Feral Cat and Fox Management, n.d. Feral Cats, [Feral cats | National Feral Cat and Fox Management Coordination](#) accessed 22.10.2024