

Submission
No 358

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

Name: Name suppressed
Date Received: 20 November 2024

Partially
Confidential

To whom it may concern,

I have been involved in companion animal management since 2017. I was first employed as an Animal Shelter Officer in a council-run animal shelter for several years, followed by three years with another council as a Companion Animal Officer in regulatory services.

I would like to submit the following for consideration into the inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW. My perspective on the below points comes from my experience working within both the pound/shelter system and within council's regulatory services.

While I can only speak on these matters from my own experience, I am sure that these opinions are shared by many of my colleagues and friends in the companion animal industry, and by fellow cat lovers and owners. I sincerely hope that this inquiry can pool ideas from all areas of the industry, and come to a reasonable, ethical and financially-supported decision for our communities and for our cats.

While I believe that the "semi-owned/stray/feral" cat population in NSW should be more effectively managed (and with greater powers and funding given to organisations to do so), I do not believe that legislating for cat containment or curfew is achievable. Like many introduced species, cats are now endemic to Australia. Any program to reduce, control or eradicate feral cat populations would run into several major issues, without first establishing the facilities and organisations to manage this task. Evidence from other countries have established that programs like Trap, Neuter, Release do work, but these programs would need to run consistently, be tightly managed by dedicated groups, with ongoing funding, staffing, facilities and support that extends beyond local government. I cannot think of any organisations that have the capability to manage programs like these for more than one small colony. The proposed culling of stray/feral cats is also incredibly an incredibly concerning prospect, which stirs up a lot of community backlash, and comes with the risk of euthanising someone's pet.

The existing Companion Animals Act 1998 and Regulation 2018 does not legislate effectively for all cats. This act and regulation legislate for all dogs in Australia (which is only achievable due to the very small "stray dog" presence in Australia), so it naturally also legislates for all cats. This has created a situation where, rather than to over-legislate stray/feral cats, the legislation under-regulates owned cats, to the point that Council can only intervene in extremely specific circumstances. Many councils do not have the staffing levels or staff experience to effectively manage dogs in their local government area, let alone cats.

Practically speaking, there is a clear distinction between the established cat groups: 1. "owned" 2. "unowned/semi-owned/stray" and 3. "feral" cats. This distinction must first be made before legislation can be created and enforced to effectively manage all three types of cats – ideally with each category requiring distinct legislation.

As evidenced by the Pounds in New South Wales inquiry, our pound/shelter system in NSW is at critical levels. To increase the impounding rates of cats by enforcing containment or curfew without first having the infrastructure to adequately support that enforcement would collapse an already desperate system. Add into this the findings in the Veterinary Work Shortage enquiry – which highlights the mental, emotional and physical impact working with animals has on the people who study, care and work with them – and it would be creating a catastrophe in the world of companion animal care.

One solution to better manage cats in NSW is to support cat colony feeders and rescue groups to enact and manage trap, neuter, release programs. Animal rescue is an unregulated industry, and should be regulated to ensure a certain standard of care in NSW. Through this, grants and funding can be provided to these groups or individuals who manage cat colonies. Established colonies have been shown to stabilise cat populations. Removing cats from established colonies often creates a power vacuum, increases cat fights, and does not solve the stray cat population conundrum.

I have below relayed some thoughts regarding the Terms of Reference for this inquiry.

(b) The effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

As someone who has worked with cats from a variety of backgrounds – pets to semi-owned strays – and have seen many adopters with good intentions to keep cats contained, my experience is that for many cats who are not raised indoors from infancy, it brings them great distress to be restricted to the inside of a home. Cats are natural predators who hunt, climb, explore, and maintain what they view as their territory. They are adept at climbing, jumping, scaling walls and fences, digging, running and hiding. An uneducated owner may unintentionally place their cats into an environment that is understimulating and lacking in enrichment.

Regarding the installation of outdoor cat enclosures, cat containment systems can be prohibitively expensive to install and maintain. Many properties are not suitably designed for cat containment systems, and a development application is often needed to install a cat containment system, such as netting or an enclosure in an outdoor area. My other concern is that no cat containment system is escape-proof for all cats, and many cats who are allowed indoor/outdoor access are used to certain freedoms.

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

I have been involved in the enforcement of the NSW Companion Animals Act and regulation for several years. I have not seen any program or initiative improve the rates of cat microchipping, desexing, registration and certainly not the rate of impounding of cats at shelter or pound facilities.

The incentive to desex a cat before 4 months of age to avoid paying an annual fee is a poor initiative. My experience is that, to avoid this, many cat owners will not microchip or identify their cats. Many councils do not have the resources to annually audit for permit fees for undesexed cats. I have also frequently had to provide advice to customers who are trying to do the right thing and adopting an adult cat, or desexing an inherited cat or one that they were given or “found”, that they are required to pay the additional registration fee, despite having no control over when the cat was desexed. I believe this system needs to be re-thought, or an automatic annual audit worked into the new NSW Pet Registry framework.

Despite the requirement for microchipping and registration of companion animals, I am still shocked by the amount of customers I speak with daily that do not know what “identification” and “registration” mean regarding their pet. This is something that needs to be addressed on a state level, not just at a local government level.

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

I have worked in animal management within local council for several years. Local councils are already struggling to implement many aspects of the Companion Animals Act, as well as other regulatory branches. I know of many councils who have erased their Companion Animal officers teams, and combined this role into the general Ranger duties. I believe this has had a detrimental

impact on the management of animals in our communities. Companion Animal Officers who specialise in animal behaviour, training and animal management are required for effective dog and cat management in local council. Until this type of unit is established state-wide, I predict that any cat containment policies will not be enforced by local council due to staffing levels, council priorities and lack of staff experience.

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

The impact of cat curfews or required containment – if there was the financial support and personnel infrastructure in place for Council to enforce these things – would severely overwhelm a pound, shelter and rescue system that is already at breaking point. As an animal shelter employee for several years, every year at “Kitten season” between October to June we would be inundated with cats and kittens from all walks of life and in all states of health. In a cattery with a capacity for 30, we would be housing anywhere from 150-200 cats, and the supply would exceed demand for adoptions. This is a major physical and mental health risk to both the cats and the humans who care for them. The facility was chronically understaffed and underfunded, and the staff were overworked, with extremely high turnover. Before any cat containment strategy is considered, the critically failing pound and shelter system must first be addressed. Financial support, improved facilities, qualified staff, sufficient staffing levels and the ability to support cat containment measures must be a priority before any measures are put into law.

(i) options for reducing the feral cat population

Like many introduced species, cats are now endemic to our environment. In urban and suburban areas cats have become part of our landscape. They have formed colonies which are cared for by dedicated carers and rescue groups. To reduce the “feral” cat population, I believe it is important to support our semi-owned “stray” cat carers and rescue groups by providing them a framework for financing, providing them with options for microchipping and desexing without taking direct ownership and liability for that animal, and supporting the community to maintain a healthy semi-owned cat population.

Thank you for your consideration.