

Submission
No 348

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Wollondilly Shire Council

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INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES – LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL – ANIMAL WELFARE COMMITTEE

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/3011/Terms%20of%20reference%20-%20Management%20of%20cat%20populations%20in%20New%20South%20Wales.pdf>
<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=3011>

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the inquiry by the Legislative Council on the management of cat populations in NSW. Council provides the following responses:

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

Wollondilly Shire has extensive bushland with high conservation significance that includes extensive areas of two vegetation communities listed as Critical Endangered at both the State and Commonwealth level. These and other vegetation communities provide habitat for a high number of fauna species comprising 76 species listed as threatened under NSW Legislation that includes the koala.

Council's Biodiversity Strategy provides a framework for the management of biodiversity and addressing of threats to these biodiversity values across the Wollondilly LGA. This Strategy has identified the impacts of feral and domestic cats as a significant threat to native fauna and has developed regulatory and community awareness programs to address these threats. On average each roaming, hunting pet cat kills more than 3 animals every week – 186 animals per year (reptiles, birds and mammals). (*Invasive species Council*).

Council views feral and domestic cats as a significant threat to wildlife. As such Council has undertaken initiatives under the current legislative framework, (NSW Companions Animals Act), which allows for the prohibiting of cats within designated Wildlife Protection Areas, as an approach to minimise their impacts. Council has to date declared areas such as Scotcheys Reserve, Silverdale and Lyn Gordon Reserve, Thirlmere to protect native wildlife. Council's Delivery and Operational Plan require investigation into extending these areas. Notwithstanding, these locations are negligible in respect to the greater Wollondilly Shire LGA.

Further support from State and Federal agencies including an increase in funding and legislative reform would greater benefit the management of domestic and feral cats.

There is opportunity to strengthen legislation and introduce penalties for straying cats. Recent changes to the Companion Animals Act have resulted in 'feral' cats being contained longer than previously. A bon-a-fide 'feral' cat cannot be rehabilitated and euthanasia of these cats should be enacted as soon as possible upon entering pounds.

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

Cat enclosures can provide cats with extra space, a more optimal environment and a safe way to spend time in nature without the risks of roaming. Cats are also contained effectively by these barriers preventing the destruction of birds and other fauna. There are many different types of cat enclosures including portable enclosures, cat runs, cat proof fencing and netting. Previous programs run by the RSPCA such as 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home' and funded by the Environmental Trust have now ceased. Advice from the RSPCA is that this program has no available funding for future programs, which have seen a very positive reduction of cats wandering and impacts to wildlife, whilst improving domestic cats' health and safety by encouraging responsible cat ownership.

(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

According to advice from the RSPCA uncontained cats are at significant risk of being lost, contracting infectious diseases, being hurt or dying in an accident. Unwanted pregnancies and potential for feral cat colonies potentially occur. Providing contained conditions for cats in that they cannot roam prevents most of these outcomes.

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

The requirements of microchipping cats are promoted through Council's website and facebook pages to the community on a regular basis and occasional community workshops. Free microchipping of cats is promoted a number of times per year. Audits of cats 'identified but not registered', as required by legislated birth dates are routinely carried out. Largely these strategies are not having any significant effect. Unlike dogs, only a fraction of cats are microchipped and then subsequently registered.

A notable reason for the difference in effectiveness of identification and registration of dogs to cats is that cats are allowed to roam under current legislation. Cat registration allows owner's cats to be identified thus incurring possible additional costs.

Where cats are required to be registered, people on low incomes often cannot afford to get their cat desexed to access the cheaper rates for a desexed cat. Thus, neither registration nor desexing is undertaken. Where cat registration is required, a Cooperative Desexing Program enables low-income earners to desex their cat so they can afford to register their cats at the lower rate. However, if they are on low incomes or have multiple cats, which is more likely in low socio-economic areas due to an inability to afford desexing, registration is an added burden. Free registration and microchipping for people receiving subsidised desexing is recommended as an effective incentive, as cats are less likely to wander to mate.

Further community education and awareness from State and Federal agencies would help to further manage the issue with an emphasis on cats being desexed and contained. Community education and awareness is a significant factor in minimising the impact of domestic and feral cats on native wildlife and unwanted litters. Education programs should focus on:

- (i) Helping people make informed choices before getting a pet;
- (ii) Increasing desexing and identification;
- (iii) Encouraging cat containment
- (iv) Reducing animal abandonment

Current legislation for cats is not strong and does not prevent owners allowing their cats to wander. Providing Councils with on-going funding to undertake subsidised large-scale desexing, microchipping and registration programs and funding effective education programs to encourage people to keep cats indoors or in subsidised cat enclosures would significantly assist.

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

Prevention of unwanted cats rather than Councils having to collect/hold/euthanise, which is expensive and fails to reduce incoming numbers, should be the focus.

Whilst there is insufficient capacity to house an increase in cats at Wollondilly's animal shelter, with grant funding there would be an opportunity to target the focus on desexing and containment strategies. Together with the strengthening of legislation and introduction of penalties for straying cats would see a significant reduction in straying cats.

At its Meeting on 26 March 2024, Council resolved to write to the Minister for Local Government requesting his support for:

- a. A revision of the cat registration fee with a view to make it affordable to all cat owners and promote responsible pet ownership* (Recent legislation changes have increased the cost of registration of cats and further complicated the registration process).

- b. A review of the Companion Animals Act be undertaken to:
- (i) Review the scope of areas where cats are prohibited to enable greater targeted trapping programs for homeless cats;
 - (ii) Align the current requirements for dogs that are 'habitually' at large to also apply to cats
 - (iii) Clarify the requirements for 'Escaping dogs' and what it would mean if it included 'Escaping Cats'.

Increasing the opportunities for Councils to work with communities to encourage cat containment would greatly assist with the current issues of cat ownership. Until cats are required to be contained on an owners' property the impacts of cat ownership to others in the Community and devastating impacts to wildlife will continue. Providing grants to owners to subsidise the purchase of cat enclosures would greatly assist.

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

The National Desexing Network advises that one of the most important strategies in the reduction of euthanasia rates in cats has been low cost desexing. Analysis by NDN estimates that the cost of collection of an abandoned cat, holding the animal for an average of four days and euthanising the animal is on average \$400. In contrast, the cost of an NDN Cooperative Desexing Program is on average \$125 per cat. The urgency to get a cat desexed as soon as possible can be addressed by offering subsidies all year round and highlighting that cats can be pregnant by 4 months.

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

Effective cat containment would result in the reduction of cats that are contained in animal shelters/pounds. Preventing cats from roaming significantly reduces unwanted pregnancies, breeding of feral cats and establishment of feral cat colonies, which largely form the majority of cats that are impounded. Cat containment is a win for owners and cats – research suggest that a cat kept at home can live up to 10 years longer than if they were free-roaming (*Invasive Species Council*)

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

The limit of cats per house and containment or prohibition of cats are common approaches in ACT, Victoria and South Australia, Bruny and Kangaroo Islands. The Threatened Species Hub summary of national survey results key findings concluded that if general requirements for cats were brought into line with those which exist for dogs (ie., contained, or under effective control), then cat containment would no longer be an action that local governments need to lobby for.

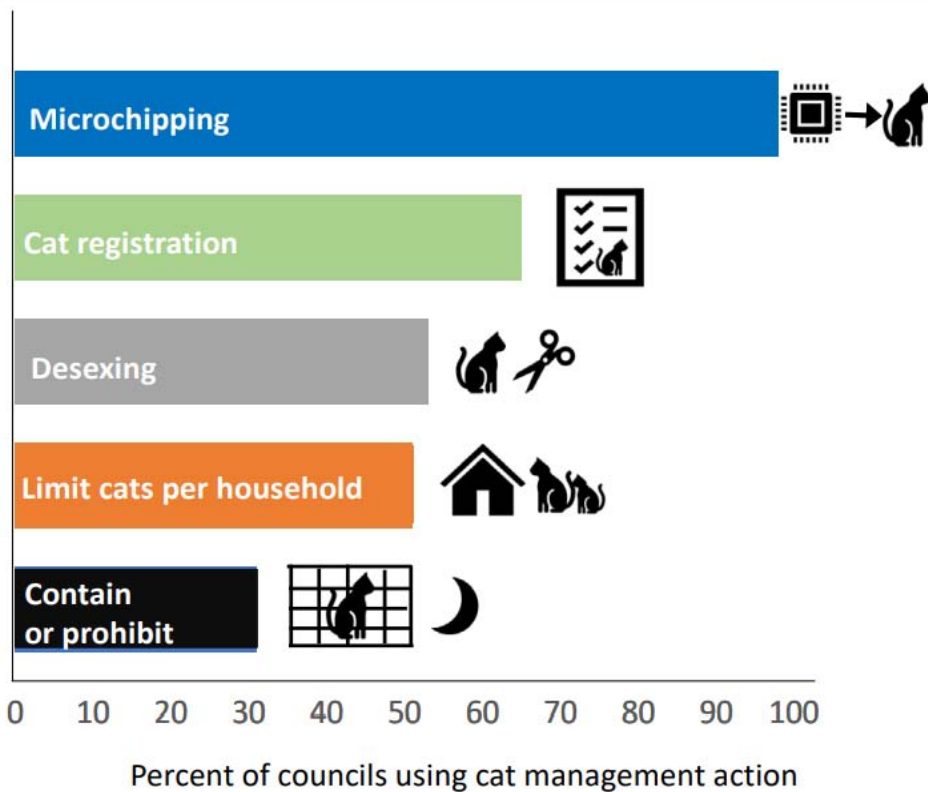


Figure 2. The percentage of local governments that use each of the cat management actions.

The control of feral and domestic cats and impacts is viewed as being most effective through a combined Commonwealth/State approach.

(i) options for reducing the feral cat population

Council would strongly support an increase in management measures to reduce the impact of cats including further financial support being provided to Councils, Local Land Services, the RSPCA and Animal Welfare to better manage the issue.

Notably, a “Trap, Neuter and Release” (TRN) Program IS NOT SUPPORTED due to the impacts on wildlife, given that a neutered cat is more likely have a longer life than an entire cat, jeopardising the integrity of native biodiversity and is not an acceptable long-term strategy. The Australian Veterinary Association, Wildlife Society and RSPCA do not support a TRN program for cats on this basis.

(j) any other related matters.

Current legislation is ineffective in managing the impacts of domestic and feral cats on native wildlife nor reducing the incidence of ‘nuisance cats’ in a suburban setting. Legislation should be enacted which results in the opportunity to take regulatory action on non-compliance with an enforceable offence, ie., if a cat is straying outside of a property, as is the requirement for dogs. The onus should be

on the cat owner to ensure containment within the property boundaries of a property. Until this action is taken, cats will continue to breed in the wild with the resultant devastating impacts on Australia's fauna and councils needing to respond to 'nuisance cat' complaints.

Yours faithfully,

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