

30 July 2020

Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy
PO Box 6021, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Parliamentary inquiry into the problem of feral & domestic cats in Australia

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) is pleased to provide this submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy *Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia*.

ALGA is the national voice of local government in Australia, representing 537 councils across the country. 75% of these councils are located in rural, remote or regional areas of Australia. ALGA is a federation of State and Territory Local Government Associations; therefore, this submission should be read in conjunction with any separate submissions received from those Associations or individual councils.

Local Government & cats

Cats are unique pests in that they can be divided into (a) feral and (b) domestic (owned and stray) categories, with individual cats moving between categories.

In terms of domestic cats, most day-to-day management is undertaken by Local Government within the legislative requirements set out in each state and territory. Some Councils, however, go beyond these requirements, introducing more comprehensive cat by-laws. They do so in response to community surveys that show a large proportion of their local rate-payers favour strong action to curb cat impacts on wildlife and nuisance behaviour. Such councils are typically peri-urban, contain green wedges or have shared boundaries with conservation parks. Rate payers may well have made a lifestyle choice in moving to the area, attracted by its high biodiversity values and environmental integrity. Councils in these 'green' local government areas wishing to introduce cat management by-laws have the power to enact:

- registration of cats;
- limits on the number of cats;
- identification by micro-chip or collar and tag;
- de-sexing;
- curfews;
- confinement and/or control; and
- nuisance and wandering controls.

However, doing so requires extra resources, such as the employment of additional staff, and acquisition of additional vehicles, micro-chip scanners and holding facilities to house animals caught afterhours before transport to an animal pound. Such by-laws necessitate management of ongoing public awareness, handling of queries and complaints, seizing and impounding cats and ensuring compliance through issuing and administering penalties. It is possible that if resources were available more councils might survey residents and if there was support, introduce more stringent controls.

With regard to feral cats, most management programs are undertaken by private landholders. However, some local governments in regional and rural areas have partnered with landholders, state governments and research organisations to facilitate ambitious feral cat eradication programs. The Kangaroo Island Council initiative in this regard is a good example. Where trapping is undertaken with the help of a local council, there will be a need to acquire and service traps as well as provide training in best-practice trapping to:

- increase trap success;
- ensure humane captures and that feral cats caught are humanely killed;
- minimise non-target captures;
- assess for injury any non-target animals caught; and
- assess cat status – to ensure registered domestic cats are not culled.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

1. The prevalence of feral & domestic cats in Australia

There is a plethora of research around the prevalence and impacts of feral and domestic cats. An estimated 2.7 million domestic cats and between 2.1 and 6.3 million feral cats are estimated to inhabit Australia¹. In 2016, 29% of Australian households had a domesticated cat².

2. The impact of feral & domestic cats, including on native wildlife & habitats

Numerous studies have shown that domestic and feral cats have had a major impact on native fauna³.

3. The effectiveness of current legislative & regulatory approaches

There are generally three measures for domestic cat management adopted by state and territory legislation: registration, micro-chipping and desexing. There is, however, little consistency in these approaches across jurisdictions. While all states and the ACT require micro-chipping, registration and desexing on the other hand are required by only four and three jurisdictions, respectively (See Table 1). There is no national database of micro-chipped cats. No states or territories have legislation requiring cat containment ('curfews' are supported by the RSPCA), cat trapping or ongoing public education programs, or provide resources to assist Councils and ratepayers wishing to pursue such options.

State /Territory	De-sexing	Registration	Micro-chipping
NSW	No Reduced registration fees for desexed cats.	Yes.	Yes.
Vic	No Reduced registration fees for desexed cats.	Yes.	Yes.
Qld	No Reduced registration fees for desexed cats.	No.	Yes.
WA	Yes All cats over 6 months of age to be desexed.	Yes.	Yes.
SA	Yes It is an offence to own an un-desexed cat over 6 months old.	No.	Yes.

¹ Legge, S. et al (2017). Enumerating a continental-scale threat: How many feral cats are in Australia?". *Biological Conservation*. 206: 293–303.

² Animal Medicines Australia (2016), *Pet Ownership in Australia 2016*, Animal Medicines Australia

³ Robley, A. et al (2004). *Interactions between feral cats, foxes, native carnivores, and rabbits in Australia*. Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research.

Tas	Yes All cats over 6 months of age to be desexed.	No.	Yes
ACT	Yes It is an offence to own an un-desexed cat over 3 months.	No.	Yes.
NT	No	No.	No.

Table 1 State and territory cat legislation

While microchipping is required in all states and the ACT, there is little regulation of, or protocols for, the electronic identification of cats, and no minimum standards for:

- approved microchip types;
- scanner reading capacity;
- accreditation for implanters;
- licensing requirements for registration;
- registry operation; and
- links between registries nationally.

4. The effectiveness of Commonwealth action & cooperation with states on this issue

The National Feral Cat Taskforce has facilitated a greater understanding across jurisdictions of the impact of cats on native fauna. However, making funding available to develop and test effective broadscale feral cat control techniques remains the most important means to improving feral cat management.

5. The efficacy, cost effectiveness & use of current & emerging methods for cat control cats

It is still not clear if current broadscale techniques such as baiting are entirely effective. Future use of gene drive technology for feral cats will require two streams of research: developing the technology in simpler species such as the house mouse; and improving understanding of feral cat population genetics and reproductive biology. Research into new methods should be given priority funding.

6. The efficacy of import controls for high risk domestic cat varieties to prevent the impacts of feral & domestic cats, including on native wildlife & habitats

The 2008 ban on Savannah Cat imports highlights the value of import restrictions.

7. Public awareness and education in relation to the feral & domestic cat problem

Recognition of the impacts of cats has increased in recent years, in part due to the focus placed on the problem by the federal Threatened Species Commissioners. As noted, some councils have introduced strong cat by-laws in response to this growing awareness. However, the awareness needs to be more widespread. A lack of awareness has in part resulted in states overturning cat by-laws introduced by Councils despite those Councils having undertaken extensive community consultation prior to acting.

8. The interaction between domestic cat ownership & the feral cat problem, & best practice approaches to the keeping of domestic cats in this regard.

With feral cats ubiquitous across Australia, they do not need to rely on domestic cats to keep their populations stable, although there is likely to be genetic flow, particularly in peri-urban environments.

Recommendations

ALGA supports:

1. The provision of greater funding nationally for raising public awareness of cat impacts;
2. Harmonisation of state and territory cat laws;
3. Greater regulation and uniformity of cat micro-chipping protocols;
4. The introduction of a national register into which the details of microchipped domestic cats must be entered;
5. The commitment of greater resources to cat control research and programs and support for councils in this area.

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Yours sincerely,



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