



SSROC submission on the *Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia*

For the attention of:

Committee Secretary
The Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy

PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Introduction

The Southern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (SSROC) is an association of eleven councils. SSROC provides a forum for the exchange of ideas between our member councils, and an interface between governments, other councils and key bodies on issues of common interest. Together, our member councils cover a population of over 1.7 million, or one third of the population of Sydney.

The land covered by the SSROC region extends from the southern shores of Sydney Harbour to the edge of the Royal National Park in the South, and from the Tasman Sea in the east halfway to Parramatta in the west. The region covers 679 square kilometres and is rich with waterways, coastal zones, nature reserves, national parks, bushland as well as natural and protected areas. We also have highly urbanised areas such as the Sydney CBD through to suburban and peri-suburban areas.

Our Submission

This inquiry provides a valuable opportunity to represent the concerns and potential opportunities for the improved management of feral and domestic cats in the SSROC region and beyond. This submission closely reflects the strategic approach developed over years of regular consultation with member councils and was developed with the assistance of local government officers who work in natural area management and biodiversity protection and who also participate in the Sydney Pest Animal Action Network (SPAAN). We acknowledge support from the Greater Sydney Local Land Services LLS as they work with our councils to assist and guide the SPAAN Network.

If we are serious as a nation about protecting our biodiversity and reducing the continuing threats to and extinction of our native species, then we need to more effectively manage the issue of cats and the harm they are known to cause to native wildlife. Revised, effective and enforceable legislation will provide a precedent for the management of problem cats including feral, domestic and unowned cats across greater areas for all levels of government, particularly local government as the primary land managers in urban areas.

Key Recommendations

Below are the key recommendations relevant to this inquiry.

1. Declare feral cats as a pest species under Federal and State legislation.

It is widely documented that the [impact of feral cats in Australia](#)¹ is causing irreversible harm to our native wildlife and biodiversity. Feral cats can live in our towns and cities as well as in remote areas of the country. Feral cats and domestic cats are the same species - *Felis catus*.

Local governments in urban areas face challenges in managing feral cats outside of protected areas such as RAMSAR wetlands or other declared protected areas. These include ecologically sensitive and conservation areas as well as urban bushland where native wildlife is being harmed. Additionally, there is very limited ability to control cat movement in public spaces (even densely developed areas) where there are known or developing pockets of high biodiversity.

Not all states or territories have declared feral cats as a pest species, despite being a recommendation of the [Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats](#)² and being supported by relevant Ministers in the [National Declaration: feral cats as pests](#)³. Such a declaration will drive urgent action and may assist in attracting resourcing for control programs in both urban and rural areas.

2. Expand the definition cats to include a third category of “unowned” cats.

The terms “feral cat” or “domestic cat” do not effectively translate to the management of cats in urban areas. The [NSW Companion Animal Act](#)⁴ defines ‘cat’ as an animal of the species *Felis catus*, whether or not domesticated. From July 2020 the Act requires cats to be registered, microchipped and desexed. Owners of cats not desexed by four months of age will be required to pay an annual permit in addition to their annual registration fee. Desexing may reduce the roaming of some domesticated cats, however may do little to assist control of stray or roaming cats where ownership cannot be established or known. In urban areas, roaming cats are often termed colony, stray or street cats where there is no known or declared owner.

The RSPCA⁵ recognises the following sub-populations of cats:

- Feral – these cats are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and reproduce in the wild.
- Domestic – all cats with some dependence (direct or indirect) on humans. There are three sub-categories of domestic cats:
 - Owned – these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable although sociability varies.
 - Semi-owned – these cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider they own them. They are of varying sociability with many socialised to humans.
 - Unowned – these cats are indirectly dependent on humans with some having casual and temporary interactions with humans. They are of varying sociability, including some who are unsocialised to humans, and may live in groups.

¹ Science for Saving Species Research findings factsheet Project 1.1.2 Threatened Species Recovery HUB, National Environmental Science Program

² Threat Abatement Plan for feral cats Australian Government 2015

³ National Declaration: feral cats as pests – Melbourne VIC 2015

⁴ Companion Animals Act 1998 No 87

⁵ Identifying Best Practice Cat Management in Australia A Discussion Paper – RSPCA May 2020

The Australian Veterinary Association in their policy for [Management for Cats in Australia](#)⁶ recognises three distinct populations of cats:

- Owned or domestic,
- Unowned or stray, and
- Feral.

The complexity of issues relating to cats in urban areas can be highly emotive and polarizing, and local government is often challenged with management of unowned and stray cats.

SSROC recommends that the definition of cats at both a Federal and State levels include a third category of “unowned” covering unregistered, unmicrochipped, semi-owned and unowned cats to assist with improved management and removal of cats from urban areas of high biodiversity value.

3. Reform the NSW State Companion Animal Act.

Currently there is no legislation relating to domestic cat management at the Commonwealth level. This inquiry states as a term of reference, consideration of *“the interaction between domestic cat ownership and the feral cat problem, and best practice approaches to the keeping of domestic cats in this regard.”*

The stated principal of the NSW Companion Animal Act is to *“provide for the effective and responsible care and management of companion animals”*. As mentioned previously, the Act makes no distinction between domestic and feral cats. The main requirements of Local Government under the NSW Companion Animal Act are (in general terms) to:

- promote awareness within its area of the requirements of this Act with respect to the ownership of companion animals, and
- take such steps as are appropriate to deal with dogs, in particular, dangerous dogs

The NSW Companion Animal Act, in its current form does little, if anything to provide enforceable legislation to assist councils with managing:

1. roaming cats who are owned (registered, microchipped and desexed) and
2. roaming cats who are not owned (unregistered, not microchipped and potentially not desexed).

Both of these groups inflict harm and death to native wildlife, by eating wildlife and transmitting diseases such as Toxoplasmosis to native birds and animals. Wildlife affected includes birds, small and large mammals, reptiles and invertebrates.

Local councils are experienced in the control of pest animals, understanding of animal welfare impacts, and are willing to uphold ethical treatment of animal control in the best possible way. SSROC supports the finalisation of the national welfare code for cats to be mandatory or at a minimum, a cat welfare code incorporated under animal welfare legislation in NSW.

Although Councils have the option of developing by-laws, potentially restricting cat movement in certain declared areas, this is often challenging and vexed with community and lobby group opposition. Individual councils are under-resourced and often ill-prepared to manage the confrontations and expectations of national and local lobby groups.

The RSPCA recommends that best practice cat management requires communication and involvement of stakeholders in decision making and finding solutions. All stakeholders involved with cat management including National Parks, cat societies and the broader community need to understand the detrimental impact of cats on our wildlife and the need to collaborate towards

⁶ Management of cats in Australia RSPCA – ratified 29 July 2016

implementing effective and humane management strategies to give the best opportunity for the survival of our native wildlife.

SSROC therefore recommends that The NSW Companion Animal Act be reformed to enable restrictions on the movement of owned and unowned roaming cats. Greater power for Local Government to enforce these restrictions should include options for infringements to control restrictions on ownership and eventual options of confiscation and re-homing or euthanasia, (similar to how The NSW Companion Animal Act legislates dangerous dogs).

4. Alignment of State and Local Government objectives with EPBC Act and provision of resources to achieve effective outcomes.

Predation by feral cats is listed as a Key Threatening Processes (KTP) under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act), which is currently under review. The Threat Abatement Plan (TAP) for predation by feral cats (2015) sets out a national framework to guide and coordinate Australia's response to the impacts of feral cats on biodiversity. The TAP identifies the research, management and other actions needed to ensure the long-term survival of native species and ecological communities affected by predation by feral cats. Whilst it is noted that the Australian Government does not have the jurisdiction to legislate the control of domestic cats, some of the relevant points in the TAP include:

- For removal and control efforts to be sustained, the transition of cats from domestic or stray to feral must be prevented so that feral cat populations are not enhanced, or new populations established.
- Domestic cats may need to be divided to confined and unconfined cats because the potential for these two groups to impact on native fauna is different.

Currently Local Government is charged with the responsibility for management of feral, domestic and unowned cats, enforcement actions, as well as stakeholder and community engagement. As discussed above there are shortcomings with current state legislation to support this.

SSROC recommends alignment of Federal and State Government legislation together with access to sufficient resources for Local Government to assist with the delivery of positive community and stakeholder engagement and achieve effective outcomes. This will assist local councils to support achievement of the EPBC Act objectives for the protection of our unique biodiversity.

In order to make this submission within the timeframe for receiving comments, it has not been possible for it to be reviewed by all councils or to be endorsed by a formal meeting of the SSROC Executive. I will contact you further if any issues arise as it is reviewed. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to get in touch.

For any enquiries regarding this submission, please contact Helene Forsythe, Program Manager, at helene.forsythe@ssroc.nsw.gov.au or 02-8396-3801.

Yours faithfully,



Helen Sloan
Acting General Manager
Southern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils