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Victorian Pet Census – How will it improve animal welfare?

Australia's Peak Animal Welfare Body questions how the census will help to improve animal welfare.

On the 30th of June 2023, a media release from Minister Gayle Tierney, Minister for Agriculture, announced the Pet Census was to be launched in order to "gather crucial information on pet ownership and the attitudes and experiences of owners".

Under the guise of improving animal welfare, Animal Welfare Victoria (AWV) subsequently launched the Pet Census on the 3rd of July 2023.

Here's what Animal Care Australia knows about how the census became a reality:

- The amount of \$600k was allocated by the Victorian government to fund the census.
- The census was brought about by the parliament agreeing to implement a Veticare program. Veticare was proposed and championed by the Animal Justice Party.
- AWV engaged a third-party consultancy company to establish, launch, and collate the census data.
- AWV was revealed to have held its own meetings with enforcement stakeholders and some local council representatives separate to other stakeholders in order to draft the questions within the census.
- Animal Care Australia was invited to attend one of several consultations. Within that consultation other stakeholders included, local council representatives, the Pet Industry Association of Australia, rehoming representatives and RSPCA Victoria.
- Via the consultancy company, AWV provided a draft of the census to stakeholders who were asked for their feedback.

Concerns raised by stakeholders (including Animal Care Australia) regarding the intent and outcomes of the census' received the same response, "*that will be dealt with later in the next stage*" from AWV representatives.

Of particular concern was how the data would be collected, and how data sets might be combined in order for local councils or other enforcements agencies to utilise that data to advance their own agendas.

AWV representatives categorically stated the data and data sets would not be able to be linked in order to be used against residents or for the purpose of enforcement. If no data sets are being matched then why did Dan Andrews ask on Facebook: "*Ever wondered how many golden retrievers are in your neighbourhood?*" (Posted Sunday 16th July 2023).

During the consultation stakeholders were asked to comment on: 'Whether the questionnaire addresses your key areas of interest' and 'How you may utilise the data or results?' No data matching effectively limits specific use and yet 'how will stakeholders utilise it?' How could a local council use what you tell the census? Think about that!

Local councils each have their own animal number restrictions (via Domestic Animal Management Plans) in addition to Planning Law restrictions that they are now also enforcing.

Those restrictions are placed on land less than 20 acres, used to keep, breed, board, or train animals, including livestock, and birds; and stipulate a restriction of up to 5 animals being permitted on land without planning permits that require a change of land use. That is, you cannot own more than 5 animals on less than 20 acres, without that permit to be assessed and approved by your local council.

"Animal Welfare by the experts – those who keep, care for and breed animals"

Questions asking for a person's age, income, postcode, and living arrangements could, with little effort, be used to identify specific individuals – leaving them open to possible scrutiny by any stakeholder.

Delivery of the census:

- There appears to be no safeguard limiting persons outside of Victoria from completing the census, nor is it compulsory for Victorians, so any extrapolated data will still be incomplete and inaccurate.
- There are no limits on the number of times a person can complete the census. This is concerning given the promotion of the census by particular extremist groups.
- AWW has also asked non-pet owners to contribute to the census which could lead to irrelevant feedback on pet keeping, particularly if made by biased (anti-pet keeping) respondents.
- The questionnaire asks the participant to list all of their species' types and numbers of each, then proceeds to ask all further questions about only one of those pets – including grooming requirements for that particular pet such as a lizard or goldfish.
- During the consultation process, stakeholders raised the issue of checking census data regarding husbandry matters for their pets against the actual species to ensure the results align with the appropriate species – but were told that dataset matching would not be used. So how will this data be verified as being up to standard or more concerning will not be misinterpreted as potential failure to provide proper welfare and therefore justify a claim of excessive animal cruelty?

How will any of the above points result in usable data regarding animal welfare of actual animals owned in Victoria?

How does being asked about your grooming habits for your goldfish or pet lizard relate to improving their welfare?

How will focusing on just one pet per household *“help Animal Welfare Victoria to better:*

- *understand issues facing Victoria's pet owners and their pets.*
- *understand how to support pet owners and the industries that service them.*
- *target education, policy and program initiatives relating to responsible pet ownership across Victoria, with benefits for animal welfare.”*

With the continued delays of the release of the next stage of the Animal Welfare Act Review, Cat Management Strategy and Domestic Animals Act, it appears Animal Welfare Victoria is operating under its own agenda. But exactly what is that agenda? Because it certainly does not shape up to being about animal welfare!

If you do intend on participating, please do so with caution.

Ordinarily Animal Care Australia would encourage the collection of data in order to gain a real-life understanding of the issues at hand – but in this particular case it is difficult to support a census that is flawed and will undoubtedly provide questionable statistics that could result in really concerning outcomes.

Michael Donnelly

President, Animal Care Australia

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Animal Care Australia is the Peak Animal Welfare Body representing the keepers and breeders of pets and companion animals in Australia.

About Animal Care Australia

Animal Care Australia (ACA) is a national incorporated association established to advocate for real animal welfare by those who keep, breed and care for animals. Our goal is to promote and encourage high standards in all interactions with the animals in our care.

ACA was founded in early 2018 to establish an organisation run solely by volunteers. With extreme animal rights and animal liberationist ideologies influencing government legislation, regulation and policy at our expense and to the detriment of our animals and pets, it has become necessary to provide government with a balancing voice.

By uniting the broad spectrum of animal groups, collectively we offer an experienced, sensible approach to animal welfare. We estimate our foundation ACA clubs currently represent well over 150,000 members and that is just in NSW alone!

By educating our members and the general public about the importance of treating animals with kindness and respect for their needs and promoting the humane treatment of animals to improve animal welfare outcomes, Animal Care Australia is in the unique position of collaborating, consulting and advocating for all animals within our care.

Animal Care Australia provides priority to the following:

- consulting with government for stronger welfare outcomes
- encouraging government to increase education of the public in animal welfare and best care techniques
- educating the public on handling their animals with kindness & respect and the importance of their needs
- educating the public in the differences between animal welfare and animal rights

Photo: ACA President, Michael Donnelly

