

Cat Ownership Policy & Position Statement 2026

“An Animal Care Australia policy & position”

Document version 1 – July 2026Cover image: piqsels.com/en/public-domain-photo-zktdb**Animal Care Australia Incorporated – INC1801209**

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Introduction:

Approximately 34% of Australian households own at least one pet cat, representing up to 5.3 million pet cats nationwide. Cats are the second most popular pet in Australia, with ownership rates increasing to around one third of households in recent surveys¹.

Statistics vary wildly on the number of feral cats roaming the country with numbers fluctuating between 1.4 to 5.6 million in the wild (bush) and around 0.7 million in urban areas.²

Adding those numbers to the approximate 5.3 million pet cats, results in a guesstimate total cat population of potentially 11 million cats in Australia - posing a significant 'management' problem.

How cats are owned and managed is becoming more and more vital as our cities grow, our backyards diminish, the existence of our native wildlife continues to be threatened. Free-roaming cats are considered by the broader community to be a key contributing factor to that threat to native wildlife and are a noisy neighbour (when cats are 'in heat') that should be kept within their own homes.

Animal Care Australia questions the appropriateness of the term 'cat management.' We believe that regardless of the 'type or category' of cat being referred to, the focus is not about cat management. It is about the responsible ownership of cats in Australia.

Whether that be ownership:

-  by pet cat owners; or
-  by government of its policies – including responsible funding – not the cheapest funding. By necessity, this must include responsible data collection & reporting, and most importantly, responsible education of the communities where the varying sets of cats exist that have different needs and how those different sets should be responsibly owned; or
-  of the community cats, working cats and stray cats; or,
-  of the humane removal of feral cats.

Regardless of whoever is in charge of dealing with the cats, the responsibility for doing so must be owned - not simply managed.

The question then turns to defining 'what exactly are we trying to own?'

The simple answer is there is not one definition and accordingly there is not one answer.

¹ [Animal Medicines Australia report – Sept 2025](#)

² [National Feral Cat and Fox Management Coordination](#)

Animal care is animal welfare and we all must own that. What we do not need to do is bundle all cats into the same basket.

They each require different approaches with different policies all aimed at interconnecting the one goal: do more to protect the welfare outcomes of all cats. In doing so we will not only protect the cats but native wildlife and other animals as well. They all deserve that.

Position and Policy Statement

-  Animal Care Australia supports the need for nation-wide agreement and adoption of definitions that outline the different categories of cats within Australia.
-  Animal Care Australia strongly supports free or subsidised desexing programs.
-  Animal Care Australia supports pet cats being contained to their owner's property.
-  Animal Care Australia does not support more restrictive policies such as Indoor only, or restricting of cats that are leash trained to not be permitted in community spaces.
-  Animal Care Australia does not object to removal of feral cats from native areas. Containment is not an option for these cats at all, even from a cat welfare perspective.
-  Animal Care Australia does not support local councils being provided carte-blanche control over cat policies within their local government area. State legislation must be clear as to what a council must do when a cat enters its custody and what a council cannot do with cats, ie: mandatory euthanising before attempts to assess the behaviour and potential to rehome.
-  The potential consequences of the Federal Government's Threat Abatement Plan for the Eradication of Feral Cats must include consequences on other domestically kept animals including family-owned cats and barn (farm) cats.
-  Animal Care Australia calls for funding to be prioritised in all aspects of cat ownership to ensure:
 - accurate and ongoing monitoring and research, including research into more humane ways of removing feral cats other than 1080 and PAPP.
 - education of the public includes responsible pet ownership and changing the negative narrative towards cats.
 - desexing and microchipping initiatives and programs are encouraged and available to pet owners of all socioeconomic backgrounds.
 - greater affordability measures that support owners to contain their cats on their property.

Definitions of cats

Animal Care Australia has responded and contributed to several reviews and numerous proposed legislation amendments, and cat management/containment strategies across the country. These include federal, state, and local government.

What is clear to us is the uncoordinated use of different definitions of cats with some striking misnomers ‘thrown in for good will.’ It is vital that any cat management strategy not only sets out to define the varying cat populations it is intending to include but that a nationally recognised and agreed set of definitions can be adopted.

Animal Care Australia recognises and recommends the following definitions:

 **Owned or Domestic (pet) cats.** These cats are identified with and cared for by a specific human guardian or household that takes legal and practical responsibility for their care and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable although sociability varies.

Within this category there are cats that have some form of dependence on humans, either directly or indirectly. They can be classified into subcategories based on their relationship with humans:

Semi-owned — can also be referred to as ‘community cats.’ These free-roaming cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider themselves owners and currently are not formally recognised as owners. They are of varying sociability, with many socialised to humans, and may be associated with one or more households.

A subset of these include ‘**working cats.**’ These are farm/barn cats and warehouse cats. Working cats provide a valuable service to landholders and may or may not be cared for by an owner.

 **Unowned** — often also referred to as ‘stray cats.’ These cats were previously owned but are now lost, abandoned, or separated from their home. They are indirectly dependent on humans, with some having casual and temporary human interaction. They are of varied sociability, including some being unsocialised. While similar to community cats, these can often form groups – ‘colony cats’ – and live at rubbish tips, shopping centres, and other urban environments where they can scavenge for food.

 **Feral cats** are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and reproduce in the wild.

Definitions matter, as does the environment that the cat lives in, and this varied population of cats needs to be considered separately for each aspect of ownership.

A clear distinction needs to be made about the treatment of the main categories of cats – owned (pet) cats, unowned cats, and feral cats. Strategies dealing with all unowned cats will assist in reducing the feral cat problem as these cats are most

likely to have been a pet cat at some point and socialised with people. The longer these cats remain free roaming increases the potential for them to fall into the feral category as their contact with humans decreases.

Responsible ownership of cats

Owned (domestic) cats

Cat owners play an essential role in responsible cat ownership, including:

- Providing a healthy diet, clean drinking water, and clean litter boxes.
- Providing a safe living environment with appropriate enrichment (such as toys, scratching posts, human interaction).
- Supplying veterinary care to ensure the cat's health is maintained (vaccinations, parasite prevention).
- Desexing of cats (that are not owned by breeders) reducing the number of unwanted cats entering shelters.
- Taking responsibility for the cat's behaviour and well-being.
- Current identification (microchip) and keeping the details current.
- Containment to the boundaries of the owners property, taking reasonable steps to prevent their cats from causing damage, excessive noise, becoming a nuisance to neighbours or injuring wildlife.
- Having a plan in case of emergencies (pet carrier, supplies such as litter box, food, bowls, towel, or bedding), including an emergency backup contact person.

This includes ensuring their cat's safety and wellbeing, taking responsible measures to protect native wildlife from predation within your property, and endeavouring to foster positive relationships with neighbours.

Long-Term Behavioural Change:

By encouraging responsible pet ownership through containment policies, communities become more proactive about pet care. As pet owners are more likely to keep cats contained and prevent them from roaming, there is a longer-term reduction in the number of unowned cats, further benefiting animal pounds and the broader communities.

Cat management is taking on a whole new perspective for Local Councils who are responsible for implementing and enforcing varying domestic/companion cat management laws. This includes registration, identification, desexing, containment, impoundment, and reuniting lost pets with their owners. Councils can tailor domestic animal services to the needs of their community by setting registration fees, as well as in different states/territories through Domestic Animal Management Plans (DAMPs) or implementing an Animal Keeping Policy, and introducing local laws like cat-free zones, cat containment, mandatory desexing, and pet limits.

Reduced Pressure on Resources:

If Councils implement Community Cat Programs based on high-intensity free desexing and microchipping of cats along with introducing cat containment policies, fewer cats will be entering shelters and animal welfare organisations can focus their resources on other areas, such as medical care, rehabilitation, and adoption efforts. Shelters can also allocate more funds to spay/neuter programs, helping to prevent future overpopulation.

Animal Care Australia strongly believes education is the most important and cost-effective measure any government can pursue as a part of any cat ownership strategy. Excessive annual permit fees and excess animal permits only complicate owners responsibilities AND are more often than ignored due to the financial costs involved. This level of high non-compliance then leads to more cats being abandoned or left to free roam.

Unowned cats

The long-term outcome should be to reduce the number of stray and community cats using a variety of approaches:

- Ensure the humane treatment and welfare of all unowned cats encountered.
- Reduce the number of unowned cats through education, desexing, and prevention.
- Ongoing funding from Government.
- Minimise harm to wildlife and ecological systems.
- Provide clear, safe, and effective procedures for volunteers.
- Promote responsible cat ownership in the community.
- Support sustainable long-term solutions based on peer-based research and best practice.
- Designated colony caregivers who can track the colony size and keep records to be able to provide accurate data.
- Collaboration between animal shelters, rescues, veterinarians, wildlife agencies, neighbourhood groups, volunteers, pet owners and local councils.
- If euthanasia is required, it should be conducted humanely.

Feral Cat Ownership

There must be a humane, science-based approach to the reduction of pure feral cats in Australia. Currently, the 2024 Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats is coordinated at a Federal Government Level and is an ongoing plan that is slowly being implemented.

The challenges of the management of feral cats are vast and have long divided many people and communities in Australia with opposing views on the solutions.

The Threat Abatement Plan (TAP) appears to have no new strategies other than what is currently available by state and territory governments. This paper seeks to create a federal version which all states/territories would be required to abide by.

TAP is primarily directed towards feral cat management in natural environments and not in urban locations – Animal Care Australia has concerns with this approach – as feral cats cause concern and issues in all locations. The ‘potential consequences’ of the Plan, must include consequences on other domestically kept animals including family-owned cats and barn (farm) cats.

Animal Care Australia provides the following stand-out points of the Threat Abatement Plan:

- Cats in populated cities, towns and rural properties are referred to as ‘stray cats’ in the consultation paper but fall under the feral cats definition in the consultation paper. Management of stray and feral cats in these locations must be different due to the human demographic and proximity to other companion animals and wildlife.
- Given the Threat Abatement Plan is a 30-year objective with further reviews and framework being established over the next 5 to 10 years, funding plans should be prioritised to ensure accurate and ongoing monitoring and research.
- Poison baits are currently being used, and there will always be a measure of pain caused by ingesting a poison designed to kill. A continued review of all stages of the poison life cycle must be undertaken to improve methods for future years.
- The consultation draft refers to a robust estimate, based on research, of 1.4 to 5.6 million cats categorised as feral within Australia. This is a substantial discrepancy of 4.2 million cats which suggests that the research and data modelling is not as robust as presented.
- There is no financial information regarding the cost per year (or over the past 5 years) that has been spent on feral cat management plans or where the funding has been derived from.
- The most substantial cost relates to creating safe havens, protection and fencing at a cost of \$42,050,000 over a 5-year period. The total estimated costs for all of the actions and objections is \$60,100,000, and yet there is no information as to where this funding is going to come from, how it will be used and what the success rate for implementation is likely to be.
- There were no statistics reported in the consultation draft (Sept 2023) as to the effectiveness of the abatement plans currently in place on decreasing the number of feral cats in locations of human habitation or infrastructure (towns, cities, rural).

- Any version of euthanasia must be humane, and any pain, discomfort and distress must be minimised as far as possible. There is ongoing debate as to the humaneness of using poisons in baits, the level of pain they cause as the animal dies and impacts on non-target species such as wildlife.
- The NSW code of practice for the effective and humane management of feral cats (published in March 2022 ³) states that their experience with baiting in large areas is not effective. Cat management areas of human habitation or infrastructure (urban, towns, cities, rural) must be handled differently due to the proximity of pet cats (and other companion animals) and humans.

Animal Care Australia made the following recommendations:

- Animal Care Australia strongly OPPOSES allowing individual councils to set cat free suburbs.
- Animal Care Australia strongly opposes providing Local Councils with greater powers, particularly in placing household limits on pet ownership.
- Government needs to monitor invasive species and develop achievable management plans rather than relying on quick cost effective – short-term measures.
- Animal Care Australia strongly recommends the inclusion of representation of pet cat keeping organisations on this Taskforce. Animal Care Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide that inclusion and consultation.
- Animal Care Australia strongly recommends the inclusion of representation of pet cat keeping organisations within the Practitioner and Resources Network.
- Animal Care Australia supports maintaining, enhancing, and updating Codes of Practice and Standard Operating Procedures, with the caveat that all stakeholders and affected community groups must be consulted during any review, development, or implementation.
- Animal Care Australia supports refining the use of existing tools, and to develop new tools, for directly controlling feral cats, and make the tools appropriately accessible, with the caveat that all reports and research results are released for stakeholder feedback.
- Animal Care Australia welcomes and supports the inclusion of the following with the Threat Abatement Plan and we hope this is a requirement that all states and territories must adopt:
 - Mesopredator control by dingoes: Carry out research to evaluate how dingo management could affect feral cat abundance and impacts and the consequences of such effects on threatened species and

³ [NSW Code of Practice for effective and humane management of feral cats](#)

ecosystem resilience and then develop costed options for landholders at regional scale.

- Toxic baits (Eradicat, Curiosity, Hisstory) and alternative toxin presentations (e.g., Felixer) are registered and available for use in those parts of Australia where their use is justified based on the biodiversity benefit, overall humaneness, and sustainability.
 - The biodiversity benefits, and attendant risks, of shooting, trapping, and tracking for controlling cats, in different contexts, are better quantified.
 - The use of guardian dogs to repel cats from sites supporting populations of cat-susceptible species has been trialed and evaluated.
 - The potential to develop synthetic biology (e.g., immune-contraception, gene drives) to reduce populations of cats is explored.
 - Improved understanding of the extent to which cat recognition and avoidance by native prey species can be encouraged via managed selection.
- Animal Care Australia **STRONGLY SUPPORTS** a One Health approach by all parties invested in the implementation of the Threat Abatement Plan.

The ownership of feral cats must be enacted by all levels of government under one overarching Plan and while the Threat Abatement Plan appears to aim for this outcome, to date, there is no attempt being made to enact this Plan in its full context, especially at a local government level.

Cat overpopulation

Most Local Council data shows that around 95% of registered cats are desexed, the desexing status of the remaining unregistered pet cats remains unknown.

What is referred to as cat overpopulation presents a significant challenge for everyone. The primary cause of cat overpopulation is the lack of desexing of cats. Cats can begin breeding as early as four months of age and produce up to three litters per year, this can quickly lead to a large, unsustainable population in any given location.

While registered cats can benefit from desexing incentives offered to owners by Local Councils and other organisations, desexing semi-owned and unowned cats is far more difficult. These cats are often the subjects of rescue groups and because they often lack registration, identification, legal owners and have no access to proper care, they are far more likely to reproduce uncontrollably and live short, precarious lives.

Ultimately the longer these cats remain free roaming they can contribute to the feral cat population with some moving between the different sub-population categories outlined in our definitions section.

Cat welfare

Most research and experts agree that the best welfare outcomes are achieved when keeping cats contained to the owner's property.

Cat Containment

To be clear: when referring to containment Animal Care Australia supports the cat being contained to the owner's property and is not stating this means permanent incarceration to indoor living ie: 'an indoor-only cat'.

Animal Care Australia also acknowledges the necessity for rodent control to allow 'barn cats' to be able to roam more broadly around the general homestead and buildings – but this should not include or encourage broader free-roaming beyond that property.

Animal Care Australia considers 'effectiveness of containment' to be the combined result of improving environmental outcomes (including protection of native wildlife) alongside good welfare outcome for cats.

Policies that increase cat abandonment, say, because community cats are mandated to be owned by an individual, will create more new welfare issues than they solve. Policies need to be implemented at a local level, rather than statewide to be appropriate for the community as well as the specific population of cats and yet these must still align with the broader nation-wide goal of preventing free-roaming cats.

That said, cat containment policies can be effective, mostly to the welfare benefits of the cats, however successful widespread implementation relies on education of cat owners of those benefits and incentives or subsidies for cat containment.

Cat containment policies aimed at limiting cats to indoor environments or secure outdoor enclosures have shown effectiveness in reducing the impact of incidents involving domestic cats.

It should be noted Animal Care Australia supports the use of both indoor AND secure outdoor containment. For the purpose of cats living within unit complexes, this could include enclosing the outdoor balcony and taking cats for a walk on a lead (and harness) in the same manner as dog owners.

Animal Care Australia acknowledges cats kept indoors cause little to no harm to native wildlife. However, when left unattended outside, they can still harm the occasional 'straggler' that enters into the cats' environment.

In the ACT, where 24/7 containment policies are common, there has been a notable benefit of improving the health and safety of cats, leading to lower injury rates, fewer accidents, and this will result in longer life spans for contained cats.

The predominant barrier to such policies is the cost to the owner and quite often the amount of red-tape required by some local councils as they see the construction of outdoor enclosures as structures requiring DA approval. This must be rectified. Mindsets of Councils must be re-set in order to make the implementation of containment policies easier.

Councils must allow cats to be outside if under the strict controlled supervision of their owner which would include a pet carrier, lead, and harness, etc, while not free roaming.

There are many benefits and greater welfare outcome for cats under contained conditions:

Improved Cat Health and Safety:

Cats who are contained 100% of the time and are not allowed to free roam off property will not suffer injuries from external factors such as car accidents, fights with other animals and predators and reduced likelihood of coming into contact with infectious diseases.

Reduced Risk of Parasite and Disease Transmission:

Free-roaming cats are more likely to encounter and spread diseases and parasites, such as toxoplasmosis, Panleukopenia, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV), Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis and Ringworm. Containment helps minimize these risks, contributing to better public health and reducing the spread of zoonotic disease.

Lowered Veterinary Costs:

Contained cats tend to have lower medical expenses due to fewer injuries, reduced disease exposure, and less wear and tear on their bodies from outdoor hazards. This can lead to fewer vet visits and lower costs for pet owners and reducing stress triggers on cats.

Reduced Nuisance to Neighbours:

Roaming cats can cause conflicts with neighbours by digging in gardens, defecating in yards, or hunting local birds. Containment can prevent these issues, contributing to more harmonious neighbourhood relations.

Cats that have always been indoor cats have no issue with living indoors; however, cats that have been allowed to enjoy the outdoors can take some time to adapt to full time containment and this must be given consideration as cats adjust to property only containment.

Any change in containment policy needs to have a transition period and support/

advice from cat behaviourists to help cats adjust to any changes in their husbandry. It is easy to blame owners for not doing the right thing, but they need to be assisted to do this in a way that is cat friendly.

All pets deserve to have a good life, and changing these conditions overnight can cause stress, and create behavioural problems. Many cat owners do not understand cat behaviour well at all, and these struggles can lead to an increase in pound surrenders, and pet abandonment. Government should never make pet ownership more difficult or expensive.

To ensure a happy and healthy life for a contained/indoor cat, certain environmental and care needs must be met. Providing an enriching, safe, and comfortable environment is key to their well-being, including (but not limited to):

- Space to Explore and Climb.
- Enrichment and Mental Stimulation.
- Litter Box.
- Scratching Posts.
- Comfortable Sleeping Areas.
- Proper Nutrition.
- Grooming.
- Health Care.
- Companionship.

Farm/barn cats need vastly different policies to ensure they remain on their owner's property but are not restricted from roaming that property. Consideration by governments to permit the use of virtual fencing parameters (such as CatWatch) must be further investigated, legislated, and encouraged by government. Research into effective brands and manufacturers should be included to ensure only those brands found to contain a cat safely and humanely are recommended within the schedules of legislation.

Animal Care Australia does not object to removal of 'correctly identified' feral cats from native areas. Containment is not an option for these cats at all, even from a cat welfare perspective.

Negative Impacts

When containment measures are enforced, more cats may be brought to pounds especially unowned or semi-owned cats, creating a surge in impoundments. For pounds, this additional pressure can be challenging, both financially and logistically, especially in communities with limited resources.

Increased Surrender Rates:

Cat containment laws can lead to increased surrender rates as some pet owners may

not be willing or able to comply with containment regulations. This includes owners who might have difficulty keeping their cats indoors, especially in rural or low-income areas where outdoor space is common. As a result, these cats might be brought to shelters, adding pressure to already overburdened facilities

Higher Costs for Shelters:

Animal shelters may experience a rise in operational costs related to enforcing containment regulations. This includes costs associated with trapping, microchipping, and extra administrative work to track and manage impounded cats. In some cases, shelters must invest in increased staffing and resources to handle the greater number of cats, especially in communities with large stray populations that are only now being addressed by the enforcement of containment policies.

Increase in Euthanasia:

The containment policy shift may also result in higher euthanasia rates in the short term. Shelters that face a spike in surrendered or impounded cats may not have the capacity to accommodate all animals, particularly if local adoptions do not keep pace with intake. In some cases, this can lead to euthanasia, especially for cats deemed "unadoptable" due to health or behavioural issues. This is where clear definitions of the differences between stray cats to feral cats is vital. Phase-in periods for containment policies will also assist in this space, allowing the community to adapt to the changes without immediate and deadly consequences but also providing councils with an opportunity to phase in initiatives to deal with the collection, desexing, microchipping, and subsequent rehoming of stray and unowned cats. Adopting different steps in policies allows for the phases to avoid sudden and overwhelming influxes of cats into the system.

Public Resistance and Non-Compliance:

In some communities, the introduction of containment laws may face resistance from the public, especially from individuals who view outdoor access as essential for their cats' well-being. Non-compliance can lead to more enforcement actions, potentially straining local resources as animal control officers may be required to manage non-compliant pet owners and deal with increased numbers of cats being brought into the system

Negative Impact on Community Engagement:

As shelter capacity is strained, some communities may see a decline in their engagement with local shelters, particularly in urban areas where the enforcement of containment laws may seem burdensome. This disengagement can affect donations, volunteer efforts, and adoption rates, undermining the long-term sustainability of shelters.

Again, greater education and phasing in of policies will assist in this space.

When done well, containment is not about restriction, it is about safety, enrichment, and responsible pet ownership.

Education

Identifying the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership is difficult without any fully invested studies conducted in Australia and without specific statistics or surveys.

Survey results are only as good as the data that is entered by those providing information about themselves. The various surveys completed in the past 3 years shows that the number of pet cats in Australia is consistent at approximately 5,300,000.

A 2023 survey on Cat Welfare commissioned by the Cat Protection Society in NSW ⁴ indicates that 21% of the 519 people surveyed reported that they got their cat from a friend, neighbour, or family members and 19% from a shelter, which is consistent with the same survey conducted in 2019.

We need to be mindful that most people who complete these surveys are generally responsible pet owners whose cats are desexed and do all the right things.

Statistics are needed on those who are not being responsible pet owners and that is the challenge to identify those people and approach them in a way that they feel safe that there will be no consequences for the answers to their questions.

Solutions like targeted community programs or nighttime curfews may offer some mitigation by focusing on high-impact times or specific areas to reduce negative impacts without overburdening pounds.

There needs to be clear, targeted, and easily accessible information for education programs. Navigating government websites is not easy. Local council websites appear to be designed to hide information rather than provide it. Unless you know where to look specifically, it can be difficult to obtain information about pet ownership responsibilities with many people relying on information that they have been told. This leads to misunderstanding and incorrect education being passed on.

When you do find the information, it is not always clear and is open to interpretation. In 2024, there are still people who do not understand that registering the microchip for their cat is different from the lifetime registration.

By involving a diverse group of stakeholders in education efforts, communities can help foster a culture of responsible pet ownership, leading to better outcomes for both pets and their environments. The more people that spread the message, the wider the audience. These should include:

- ✓ Local Governments and Councils.
- ✓ Animal Welfare Organisations (Animal Care Australia, etc).

⁴ [Cat Protection Society survey](#)

- ✓ Animal Compliance and Enforcement Organisations (Animal Welfare League, etc).
- ✓ Veterinarians.
- ✓ Schools and Youth Organisations.
- ✓ Community Leaders and Social Groups.
- ✓ Pet Retailers and Pet Industry Representatives.
- ✓ Approved Cat Registration Bodies (such as NSW Cat Fanciers Association, ANCATS and CatsNSW).
- ✓ Breeders.
- ✓ Pet Owners.

Many people keep the locations of cat colonies secret due to the fear that the cats will be trapped and euthanised, as well as fear for the safety of the colony and negative public sentiment. The secret and transient nature of cat colonies does not promote good welfare outcomes as the cats are unknown and unidentified and have no direct access to veterinary care if required. The ability for the community to adopt these cats and move them off the streets into ownership should be encouraged and this can only be achieved if the negativity towards these cats is altered.

Compliance can be challenging, requiring public education, enforcement resources, and potentially financial support for cat owners to adapt their homes.

Support like subsidies for installing screens or building cat enclosures can encourage owners to comply with containment policies.

Strong public awareness campaigns and consistent messaging about the ecological and health benefits of containment are also essential to gaining community support.

The enforcement of mandatory containment policies needs to be approached with more a 'carrot before the stick' approach, as strict enforcement can force the community into non-compliance and can also affect staff welfare for those in creating, implementing, and enforcing these policies:

- the knowledge that impounding cats because of a breach of the containment policy may result in higher euthanasia rates and constant containment efforts contribute to mental health strain and job burnout among animal management workers.
- discouragement of cat ownership due to fear of penalties, which might increase pet abandonment, leading to even more stray cats requiring impoundment.
- varying approaches by different urban and regional Councils across Australia can create confusion for cat owners, especially if you have neighbouring urban Councils with different approaches and policies and a cat happens to be picked up outside of its owners' local council boundary. Consistency across Councils is vital here.

- regulatory and community challenges require collaborative approaches being local and state governments, as well as organisations representing various community groups (conservationists and pet owners).

While containment policies are effective, successful widespread implementation will depend on legislative changes, better resources for local councils, and efforts to build public support through education and incentives for containment practices.

In Hornsby Council (NSW), a proposal was made that any cats found by rangers outside of their home without a collar, microchip or other identification would be euthanised immediately.

This is completely unreasonable considering that cats could have escaped a pet sitter, cattery, or veterinary clinic, or the microchip may have failed – which happens more frequently than is reported, as they are rarely tested after implant.

These anti-cat policies should not be permitted under any legislation or Council By-laws and need protections in place to allow for reasonable attempts for an owner to find their lost cat.

Many councils do not have local pound facilities, outsourcing to out-of-area pound services. This makes it harder for owners to locate lost pets, especially when owners do not have transport to get to these locations.

Animal Care Australia is aware of many instances where owners call pounds, are told their cat is not there, and then later find their animal was euthanised after the holding period expired. Some pounds do list photos of animals, but the photos are so poor in terms of clarity or showing enough of the animal to identify them, and this does not help. Greater oversight of councils and pounds is needed in this space to ensure all efforts are made to get owned cats back home.

Desexing programs

The challenge with any program is cost - and finding the funding to provide these services is essential, either through local or state government or private sector or donations.

The financial costs of large-scale cat desexing programs can vary significantly depending on factors such as the geographic region, socioeconomic areas and whether the desexing is done through private veterinarians or subsidised by government or animal welfare organisations.

Those working in private practices in the veterinary industry should not be expected to provide their time and services for free.

It is not surprising that the higher proportion of pet cats that are desexed will provide wide scale benefits. Desexed cats cannot produce kittens that end up being given away to friends or family or find their way into the pound and shelter system.

Large-scale cat desexing programs are an effective, humane, and cost-efficient

solution to manage stray cat populations. They offer numerous benefits, including the reduction of shelter intake and euthanasia rates, better animal health, and positive environmental and community outcomes. However, again, clarifying the ownership or origin of the cats about to be desexed poses major deterrents. People are afraid to bring cat colony members to be desexed in fear the cats may be euthanised or they themselves could be fined for having an unregistered or non-microchipped cat. The system needs to be changed if we are truly going to see all cats that require to be desexed actually treated.

Through widespread implementation and public education, these programs can have a lasting impact on both animal welfare and ecological balance.

However, they do not address the impact that colony/semi owned and feral cats have on communities and wildlife. It will reduce the reproduction opportunities for those already within a colony.

While private practice veterinarians recognise the risks of surgery and potential long term health impacts, most will desex only after 6 months of age – for the sake of the patient. While pounds and shelters advocate for desexing as early as possible – even as young as 6 weeks of age – as a population control measure, the patient (the animal) is simply not the priority.

Australian Vets in QLD report ⁵ that almost all of their client's cats are desexed, while the opposite is reported by RSPCAQ - almost all surrendered cats are not desexed. The cats that are seen by veterinarians and the cats that the RSPCA see are not the same population of cats. The same study noted that while vets are usually seeing the owner and carer of the cat, shelters are primarily receiving animals that are strays handed in by someone who is not the owner of the cat.

This suggests that pounds, shelters, and rehoming organisations have a skewed view of pet owners, and feel that owners are irresponsible, and therefore should not have a choice when their pet is desexed, while the pet and vet industry has a very different perspective of pet ownership, with very high rates of desexing, even when done at a later age.

Reduction in Stray Populations

Desexing programs help control the number of stray cats, significantly reducing overpopulation. This is particularly effective in urban and semi-urban areas where large numbers of unowned and feral cats live. By preventing reproduction, desexing directly decreases the number of kittens born into an already struggling population. A 2023 study by the Cat Protection Society in NSW⁶ found an increase in the willingness of people to adopt or take-in a stray cat if the cat could be desexed for free (or subsidised).

⁵ [MDPI Report on Private Vets and Cat Desexing](#)

⁶ [Cat Protection Society study](#)

Decreased Euthanasia Rates

Large-scale desexing programs, often combined with adoption and rehoming initiatives, help reduce the number of cats entering shelters and pounds. This not only alleviates the overcrowding in shelters but also leads to a decrease in euthanasia rates. In Australia, where shelters have faced significant pressure from stray populations, successful desexing initiatives have been linked to fewer cats being surrendered or impounded, and as a result, fewer need to be euthanised.

Improved Animal Health

Desexing also has significant health benefits for cats.

It reduces the risk of certain cancers (such as uterine and ovarian cancers in females and testicular cancer in males) and behavioral issues like territorial aggression and the urge to roam. This leads to healthier, longer lives for cats, whether they are pets or part of managed community cat colonies. These health benefits further support animal welfare by reducing the need for veterinary interventions.

Cost-Effectiveness

Although desexing programs can involve upfront costs, they are cost-effective in the long term. By reducing the number of kittens born and preventing the spread of stray cat populations, shelters can save resources that would otherwise go into care, feeding, and medical treatment of unowned cats. For example, studies have shown that for every dollar spent on a desexing program, there is a significant return in terms of reduced future intake costs.

Positive Community and Environmental Impact

Desexing programs have wider community and environmental benefits. By reducing the number of stray cats, these initiatives decrease the impact of cats on native wildlife, as well as reducing nuisance behaviors such as yowling, fighting, and scavenging. This helps foster a healthier ecosystem and better quality of life for humans in affected areas. For example, in Australia, cities with robust cat desexing programs have reported a decline in both feral cat numbers and therefore wildlife predation.

Public Education and Engagement

Large-scale desexing programs often go hand in hand with public education efforts. These programs can educate pet owners about the importance of desexing to prevent overpopulation and promote responsible pet ownership. The outreach aspect of these initiatives encourages a broader cultural shift toward more sustainable pet ownership practice, and these initiatives need to be encouraged on a larger scale. Governments at levels acknowledge education is key and yet so few actually invest the appropriate level of financial investment.

Trap & Release Programs

Desexing colony or community cats is beneficial in reducing the continued production of cats unchecked. This will provide short term impacts and focusing on desexing male cats will have an immediate impact – a female cat cannot get pregnant without a male cat.

It may seem counter intuitive to return cats to the same locations as they will still be roaming. Cats will still predate regardless of whether humans are feeding them. It is argued that returning said desexed males will assist in controlling the expansion of the colony, and while this is true in the short term the younger virile cats will eventually take over the colony unless continued efforts to trap all male cats and desex them can be maintained for the long term. These males also break away and create their own new colonies potentially providing the expansion of larger stray and ultimately feral cat issues.

Simply desexing the male cats while effective does not prevent the female cats from being impregnated by other roaming male cats that may enter the colony – even if briefly before being driven away by the dominant male of the colony.

More knowledge and research is needed on the impacts of a TNR scheme in Australia. Most research relating to TNR initiatives comes from Europe where it is deemed to be successful, primarily because the cats are continually monitored and are provided with feed, or from the United States where there have been major failures reported.

Animal Care Australia acknowledges the variant forms of TNR, those being Catch Vaccinate Neuter Release (CVNR) and Trap, Neuter, Return and Rehome (TNRR).

While CVNR does add the additional welfare benefit of vaccinating cats, preventing further spreading of diseases and being neutered to stop reproduction, all cats are still then released back into their original environment.

Animal Care Australia is encouraged by the Trap, Neuter, Return and Rehome (TNRR) scheme as this more directly achieves the ultimate goal of prevention and removal of all free roaming cats. It is self-explanatory and includes behavioural assessment of the cats prior to rehoming.

TNRR is a management method where community cats are humanely trapped, vaccinated, and spayed/neutered to reduce populations. Dominant cats are returned to their territory, while friendly cats and young kittens are socialized and rehomed. This approach aims to minimize unnecessary suffering, stabilize colonies, and reduce the free-roaming populations.

Key Aspects of TNRR:

Process: Cats are trapped, neutered, and ear-tipped (a universal sign of a treated cat) to avoid re-trapping.

Rehoming vs. Return: While more dominant cats are returned to their established territory, friendly adults and kittens are often placed in foster care for adoption.

Colony Management: This method stabilizes colonies, reducing overpopulation, fights, and noise associated with breeding.

Benefits: It provides a humane alternative to culling and addresses animal welfare concerns.

The Australian landscape would reflect aspects of the European and the United States schemes and therefore greater focus on research into some Australian trials is vital before flying headfirst into recommending these initiatives.

- ☒ There is no evidence that any substantial data on the impact on wildlife has been collected or reported that it is associated with TNR/TNRR Programs. Animal Care Australia acknowledges there have been some studies completed, and while encouraging, these have been conducted mostly by the same small groups of researchers and have not been widely peer-reviewed.
- ☒ Research is needed to determine if and how this type of program would be suitable for cat management in urban areas versus our greater expanses of uninhabited areas.
- ☒ There is a cost factor involved with no clear pathway as to who will incur these costs and ongoing care or support for the colonies.

Animal Care Australia acknowledges that most people still oppose any scheme that releases the cats back to continue free roaming and following natural instincts regardless of predating for food or not.

Free or Subsidised Desexing:

Some councils are offering this to their local residents already, and there is an established process run by the National Desexing Network.

The National Desexing Network (NDN)⁷ is a nationwide referral system for discounted desexing made available to pet owners in financial need. It connects local councils, pet owners, and vets to be able to provide free or subsidised desexing. National Desexing Network is an initiative of the Animal Welfare League Queensland.

RSPCA NSW reported in 2023 that a trial of free desexing in the Greenacre local council area⁸ has reduced the number of kittens coming into their shelter by a third in its first year. This is information obtained via a news article and the numbers of kittens pre and post the trial are not specified which is why accurate studies are required and data reported publicly.

⁷ [National Desexing Network](#)

⁸ [Greenacre Local Desexing initiative](#)

One approach will not fix all

Logic would envisage that the containment of cats would lead to a reduction in roaming domestic males, resulting in a reduction of roaming domestic females becoming pregnant.

However, to see any major impact on the numbers of cats finding their way into pounds would require an expanded and exhaustive program of issues with stray cats, desexing, and rehoming of those cats (where possible) in order to reduce new colonies and larger feral populations. This is highlighted in claims made that cat containment policies in Victoria have failed because numbers entering pounds have not dropped. However, as is also noted when reviewing, those Councils have not introduced programs to deal with the stray cat populations OR have found it difficult to designate significant resources to doing so.⁹

Better programs and understanding of stray (and feral) cat behaviours, colonies and alike, combined with a feral cat control program that removes them humanely from the environment is what it would take to see cat populations in pounds and shelters reduced by significant proportions. Only then can a true assessment of these policies be determined.

Compliance by all owners

Another contributing factor to the potential failure of cat management policies is the ability of the local government and residents within that area to comply.

Cat containment policies have become a social justice issue, which will require greater support from all levels of government.¹⁰

The economic costs of constructing and ensuring appropriate containment cannot be met by those within lower socioeconomic areas. Enclosures can cost anything from \$700 up to several thousand dollars.

In an ideal world, a pet cat's owner will:

- ✓ keep it indoors or a secure outdoor enclosure,
- ✓ ensure that it is microchipped and lifetime registered,
- ✓ keep their contact details updated,
- ✓ have it desexed (if not already when it comes into care).

If this were to happen, cats ending up in the pound or shelter system would easily be returned to their owners and their impact is minimised in the larger scheme of things.

In an ideal world, there would be a process around microchipping and registering colony (or community cats) so there is a way to track them if they required vet care or ended up in pounds/shelters. Where their ownership could be recorded by means of a community group or residential area, this would lend itself to encouraging those

⁹ [Pet Welfare Foundation – article 1](#)

¹⁰ [Pet Welfare Foundation – article 2](#)

communities to take more responsibility for the behaviour and welfare of the cats without the fear of retribution or persecution when things go wrong.

In reality, most cats that end up in pounds, shelters and rescues are not microchipped or the information is not up to date. They are stray cats (community cats /semi owned cats) or kittens born into feral cat communities.

The approach to responsible cat ownership has to be an 'all-in, all angles, all facets enacted' action.

Without the pet owner doing their part, or the rescues removing and rehoming, or the stray cat populations continually being reduced, and the feral populations completely eradicated, the ongoing impacts of cats and their over-population will forever continue.

Every approach and aspect must be owned and actions must be carried out humanely.

Progress – not perfection

Allowing time for all policies to be implemented, promoted, encouraged, and established within community mindset can be frustrating but essential. We should not expect instant results. Advocates for or against these policies who do expect instant results are actually failing the cats.

A progress-oriented approach allows for adjustments and flexibility toward the objectives while reviewing and responding to new information and emerging issues.

Through incremental steps, we can refine and adapt our practices over time, ensuring continual improvement in cat ownership and welfare.

Closing Comments

Containment policies of any kind must be introduced gradually to ensure that cat owners can learn how to help their cats transition to a more contained lifestyle. Old cats have a more difficult time with these transitions and are less frequent hunters any way – mostly just enjoying their usual sunny spots to sleep.

Cat owners have a history of dealing with behavioural issues quite poorly, and resources, support and funding for any necessary enclosures needs to be provided by councils or the State to ensure that people are able to comply. These changes will not be cheap for some owners, and it is unfair to change the rules on people, many years into owning a cat and then blame them for not being able to adapt.

Not helping cat owners with the transition will inevitably lead to more surrenders, lost pets, and abandonment. Many owners are not members of cat or other animal clubs or in cat owner groups online and may not be aware of the law changes at all.

All of this will add a burden on the already overwhelmed pound and rescue industry. Funds need to be invested in responsible pet ownership to prevent this.

Pro cat keeping outreach will also be necessary to ensure that community cats will be taken into homes by their existing carers.

Many cultures do not have histories of indoor cats, and these migrants do not see cats as indoor pets. Allowances must be made to ensure that these communities can take ownership of these cats (containment to the owner's property, not HOUSE) while working within cultural norms, and providing resources/funding or advice to get set up initially

Animal Care Australia strongly recommends cat management policies must include:

- Investment in education about responsible pet ownership.
- Develop ongoing strategies in all areas of NSW to assist people to be able to fund the desexing of their animals.
- Provide a clearer pathway through local government for approval of secure cat containment on their properties (enclosures).
- Investments in research and studies on all programs/initiatives to obtain the data required about their impacts.
- Consult with conservation experts to look at large scale fencing to create predator free zones.

Animal Care Australia's primary position is that the best welfare outcomes are achieved when keeping cats contained to the owners property.

When done well, containment is not about restriction, it is about safety, enrichment, and responsible pet ownership

Veterinary Statement in Support of Animal Care Australia

Responsible Cat Ownership Policy

Dr Tanya Phillips BVSc (Sydney)

I submit this statement in my capacity as a Veterinarian and as the Veterinary Representative for Animal Care Australia, in formal support of Animal Care Australia's position and recommendations regarding the Responsible Cat Ownership Policy.

I support the evidence-based framework proposed by Animal Care Australia, which recognises distinct classifications of cats and the requirement for tailored, humane management strategies based on welfare, public safety, and ecological considerations.

1. Alignment with Animal Care Australia's Framework

Animal Care Australia correctly differentiates between owned, stray, community/colony and feral cats, reflecting global best practice and contemporary veterinary science. Its focus on humane treatment, preventive desexing, education, collaboration, and sustainable long-term solutions provide a strong foundation for effective population management.

2. Global Evidence Supporting this Position

International research demonstrates that high intensity targeted desexing and structured community cat management significantly reduces stray and free-roaming cat populations, lower shelter intake, and euthanasia rates, and improve animal and community welfare.

Key evidence includes:

Rand J et al. (2024) – Australian Community Cat Program: 60% reduction in cat intake, 85% reduction in euthanasia, 39% reduction in complaints.

Swarbrick & Rand (2018) – Long-term Australian TNR Program: Population reduction from 69 to 15 cats.

Tan K et al. (2017) – Median 31% reduction in colony size through TNR.

Spehar & Wolf (2018) – 84.1% reduction in shelter euthanasia using RTF/TNR.

Levy JK et al. (2003, 2014) – Up to 85% population reduction on managed campuses and targeted areas.

3. Responsible Ownership Principles

Animal Care Australia's definition of responsible ownership includes nutrition, veterinary care, identification, containment, enrichment, and emergency planning.

These principles directly address abandonment, nuisance behaviour, and uncontrolled breeding.

4. Management of Unowned Cats

The humane treatment of unowned cats through desexing, designated caregivers, structured management, and euthanasia only, when necessary, aligns with One Welfare principles and reduces long-term population growth more effectively than lethal control alone.

5. Feral Cat Management

True feral cat populations must be addressed through science-based, humane methods under the Federal Threat Abatement Plan. Clear distinction between feral and urban community cats is essential.

6. One Welfare and Human Impact

Repeated euthanasia of healthy animals causes moral distress, compassion fatigue

and burnout among veterinarians, shelter staff, and volunteers.

In Australia, veterinarians have one of the highest suicide rates of any occupation and approximately twice that of the general population. This must be considered in policy design. Systems that prioritise prevention, desexing and humane management reduce this psychological harm and support workforce wellbeing.

This aligns with the One Welfare model recognising the interconnected wellbeing of humans, animals, and the environment.

7. Conclusion

Animal Care Australia's framework represents a scientifically grounded, humane, and sustainable model for cat management. International evidence supports its focus on prevention and community-based solutions.

I strongly recommend that policymakers adopt this framework in full.

Dr Tanya Phillips BVSc
Veterinarian
Veterinary Representative – Animal Care Australia
Founder, Best Forward Pty Ltd

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