



4 May 2025

To whom it may concern,

**RE: NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 - review**

The Conservation Council ACT Region welcomes the opportunity to submit feedback to inform a review of the NSW Companion Animals Act 1988. As an advocate for the environment in the ACT region, the negative impact of roaming domestic cats and feral cats on our local wildlife has been of ongoing concern to the Council for many years. Roaming domestic and feral cats do not respect state and territory borders, and thus NSW policy affects environmental outcomes in the ACT region.

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region, including parts of NSW surrounding the ACT. We have been the community's voice for the environment in the Canberra region since 1979.

Our mission is to achieve an ecologically sustainable and zero net carbon society through advocacy, education, research and engagement with community, the private sector and with government.

We represent more than 45 member groups who in turn represent over 15,000 supporters. We harness the collective expertise and experience of our member groups and networks. We work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to achieve the highest quality environment for Canberra and its region.

**Introduction**

This submission will respond to the discussion paper question regarding how the legislation could be improved to motivate better cat owner behaviour and encourage owners to manage their cats more responsibly. The Council strongly supports a cat containment policy.

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There is a general understanding within the Australian community that cat containment delivers benefits for wildlife, for cats themselves, and for the community. According to a recent Biodiversity Council survey, two-thirds of Australians support cat containment.<sup>1</sup> The NSW Government has an opportunity to leverage mounting public support and become a leader in demonstrating how pet-owning communities can coexist with vulnerable wildlife.

The Conservation Council has long supported cat containment policies and successfully advocated for their implementation in the ACT. The Council does not support a grandfathered approach such as was implemented in the ACT, which is difficult to enforce and confusing for the community, with different cats becoming subject to different regulations. Additionally, this approach means that cats will continue to harm wildlife for many years beyond the implementation of the policy.

More broadly, the Conservation Council supports the strategy to promote responsible cat ownership through community education and engagement. Such a strategy should promote the idea that cat owners must take responsibility for their cat's impact on wildlife and the nuisance it may cause other people.

We strongly support action to undertake feral cat control where it is feasible, cost-effective and can provide a conservation benefit, as well as the action to increase cat-free conservation areas by expanding predator-proof fences in nature reserves where appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> Biodiversity Council (2024). **2024 Biodiversity Concerns Report: A survey of community attitudes to nature conservation**. March 2024.  
[https://biodiversitycouncil.org.au/admin/uploads/2024\\_Biodiversity\\_Concerns\\_Report\\_f6ea3e5ee1.pdf](https://biodiversitycouncil.org.au/admin/uploads/2024_Biodiversity_Concerns_Report_f6ea3e5ee1.pdf)

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## Key recommendations

The Conservation Council ACT Region supports and reiterates the key recommendations of the Invasive Species Council regarding cat management, which include<sup>2</sup>:

- 24/7 pet cat containment
- Mandatory microchipping of all cats
- Mandatory desexing of all cats by 4 months of age (sexual maturity)
- The production of companion animal management plans by all local councils that include provisions for the management of pet cats in line with the updated Companion Animals Act
- Stronger action on feral cats, including targeted on-ground control and allowing land managers to use the full suite of control tools

## Impacts of roaming cats on native wildlife

Australia is currently experiencing an acute biodiversity loss crisis, and cats contribute significantly to this problem. Free-roaming cats, both feral and pet, are highly efficient and opportunistic predators. Roaming pet cats kill up to 546 million animals per year in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Since colonisation, they have pushed over 30 native species to extinction.<sup>4</sup> Today, cats imperil another 123 species, which is of considerable concern in the context of the extinction crisis that we are already facing.<sup>5</sup>

Free-roaming cats can have highly localised effects on wildlife populations, especially in cases of already small or vulnerable populations. When cats prowl and hunt in an area, wildlife have to

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<sup>2</sup> Invasive Species Council. 2023. "The Impact of Roaming Pet Cats on Australian Wildlife Factsheet." <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Invasive Species Council. 2024. "Cats in Australia." Invasive Species Council. 2024. <https://invasives.org.au/our-work/feral-animals/cats-in-australia/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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spend more time hiding and escaping, which can disrupt feeding and breeding patterns.<sup>6</sup> There have been documented cases where just one free-roaming cat has caused population collapse, such as the fairy tern colony of Mandurah.<sup>7</sup>

### **Role played by roaming cats in spread of zoonotic diseases**

Free-roaming domestic cats and feral cats play a significant role in spreading zoonotic diseases such as cat scratch fever and visceral larva migrans. One zoonotic disease known to be carried by cats, toxoplasmosis, can result in illness, miscarriages and birth defects when transmitted to humans.<sup>8</sup> Cat-borne diseases cause considerable community harm, with an estimated 8,500 hospitalisations and 550 deaths from acute infections and associated side effects.<sup>9</sup>

### **Financial impact of free-roaming cats**

Not only are free-roaming cats costly to the environment, but they also carry an excessive financial burden. Recent research has shown that cats are the most costly invasive species in Australia as approximately \$18.7 billion has been spent trying to control their populations since 1960.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it has been estimated that through the transmission of zoonotic diseases,

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<sup>6</sup> Invasive Species Council. 2023. "The Impact of Roaming Pet Cats on Australian Wildlife Factsheet." <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> "Cat Causes Carnage in Rare Seabird Colony." 2019. News Portal. Murdoch University. August 2019. <https://www.murdoch.edu.au/news/articles/cat-causes-carnage-in-rare-seabird-colony>.

<sup>8</sup> Invasive Species Council. 2023. "The Impact of Roaming Pet Cats on Australian Wildlife Factsheet." <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> ABC News. 2024. "Keeping Pet Cats Indoors Would Save Millions of Native Animals and Billions of Dollars. So What's Stopping Us?," May 18, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-19/banning-pet-cats-roaming-native-animals-billions-dollars-council/103856000>.

<sup>10</sup> CSIRO. 2021. "Pest Plants and Animals Cost Australia around \$25 Billion a Year – and It Will Get Worse." [www.csiro.au](http://www.csiro.au). August 2, 2021. <https://www.csiro.au/en/news/All/Articles/2021/August/pest-plants-and-animals-cost-australia-around-25-billion-a-year>.

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cats cost Australia \$6 billion annually through impacts on human health and livestock production.<sup>11</sup>

### **Community impacts**

Free-roaming cats frequently cause problems in the community through nuisance behaviours such as fighting, yowling, defecation and urination. There is also a broader community harm inflicted by virtue of a loss of wildlife and natural values in public land use areas.

### **Benefits for cats**

Keeping cats indoors helps protect pet cats from injury and disease, reduces expensive vet bills and prolongs the cat's lifespan. Roaming cats will often fight one another, become injured or killed by other animals such as dogs and snakes, and are very prone to being hit by vehicles. Cats live longer when kept inside.<sup>12</sup>

### **Recommendations**

#### *Containment*

In light of the significant environmental, economic, health and wellbeing impacts associated with free-roaming cats, the Council strongly supports a policy of 24/7 cat containment. There is a misconception that when cats only roam during the day, they will not hunt; however, we know that cats still hunt birds and lizards during the day.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, various devices, such as bells

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<sup>11</sup> Legge, Sarah, Pat L. Taggart, Chris R. Dickman, John L. Read, and John C. Z. Woinarski. 2020. "Cat-Dependent Diseases Cost Australia AU\$6 Billion per Year through Impacts on Human Health and Livestock Production." *Wildlife Research* 47 (8): 731. <https://doi.org/10.1071/wr20089>.

<sup>12</sup> Invasive Species Council. 2023. "The Impact of Roaming Pet Cats on Australian Wildlife Factsheet." <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Rand, Jacquie, Abithaswathi M Saraswathy, Joy Verrinder, and Mandy. 2024. "Outcomes of a Community Cat Program Based on Sterilization of Owned, Semi-Owned and Unowned

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on collars, are commercially marketed with the promise of preventing hunting. While some of these items may reduce the rate of successful kills, they don't prevent hunting altogether. These devices also don't prevent cats from disturbing wildlife, which is also a serious problem.

### *Definitions*

Under various state governments' legislation, the distinction between feral and domestic cats is poorly defined, which can create difficulties regarding policy enforcement. The Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals recommends that cats be classed as domestic if they live in the vicinity of humans and depend wholly or partially on humans for survival.<sup>14</sup> By this definition, free-roaming cats in urban and peri-urban areas, in rural towns, and around farm buildings are domestic cats.<sup>15</sup> These cats can then be classified as either owned, semi-owned (fed by one or more people who do not perceive ownership), or unowned (obtain food from humans unintentionally). If unidentified with a microchip or collar and tag, they are considered stray cats. Finally, a feral cat is one which either does not live in the vicinity of humans, does not depend on humans for survival or is not socialised towards humans. The Act must clearly delineate between the different types of cats in our community to ensure policy can be implemented effectively.

### *Funding*

It will be critical that an appropriate level of funding is dedicated to ensuring the costs of cat containment remain affordable for all members of the community. Most free-roaming and impounded cats emanate from lower socioeconomic neighborhoods [6], where compliance with laws regarding pet cats is low due to the costs involved sterilisation, microchipping and registration.<sup>16</sup> In addition, rental properties including government housing typically do not have suitable cat-proof fencing and the cost of installing enclosures or fencing is prohibitive and may not be allowed under the tenancy agreement [18].<sup>17</sup>

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Cats in a Small Rural Town." *Animals* 14 (21): 3058–58.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14213058>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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For similar reasons, rural towns in Australia typically have higher per capita intake of stray cats into pounds and shelters.<sup>18</sup> There are limited options for adoption because of the small population, and therefore the local veterinarian and their staff are frequently tasked with euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats and kittens, which may cause mental distress among staff [9,10].<sup>19</sup>

#### *Microchipping, registration and de-sexing*

Microchipping, putting identifying information on a cat's collar, and registration with local council all help to ensure that escaped domestic cats can be returned to owners safely. The current framework allows owners to select between either microchipping or putting an identifying collar on their cat which can generate problems surrounding identifying ownership and therefore responsibility for care.

Requiring that cats be de-sexed before sexual maturity has multiple benefits for their health and wellbeing by preventing unwanted breeding. This also prevents roaming cats from contributing to the feral cat problem in Australia. Mandatory de-sexing should be subsidised to ensure equal access for the whole community. Alternatively, structuring cat registration fees in such a way that they incentivise de-sexing and disincentivise keeping cats that are not desexed could also be effective.

#### *Broader management*

These recommendations should be implemented in tandem with a concerted effort to reduce stray and feral cat populations across NSW. This may include targeted on-ground control and allowing land managers to use the full suite of control tools, such as baiting and shooting.

Various other measures, such as setting limits for the number of cats per household, introducing cat-free areas (in areas of ecological significance, adjacent to protected wildlife areas or in new suburbs), and developing breeder registers, may also be effective.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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## Summary

It is a positive step that the NSW Government is now engaging with the community on the issue of cat management to improve outcomes for everyone, including cats, owners and native wildlife, and we look forward to the finalisation of policy on this issue.

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