



Victorian Cat Management Strategy

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
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The Australian Veterinary Association

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. The AVA consists of members who come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

We empower the veterinary profession to thrive by providing a voice, education, community, and support.

The Australian Veterinary Association appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the *Victorian Cat Management Strategy (The Strategy)*.

AVA Statement of principles with respect to Animal Welfare

Animals are sentient beings that are conscious, feel pain, and experience emotions. Animals and people have established relationships for mutual benefit for thousands of years.

Humans have a duty of care to protect animals. Where a person does not meet his or her obligations to animals in his or her care, animals may suffer. When this happens, the law must be able to adequately intervene to enforce compliance and prevent suffering.

Animals have intrinsic value and should be treated humanely by the people who benefit from them. Owned animals should be safe from physical and psychological harm. They need access to water and species-appropriate food and shelter and should be able to fulfil their important behavioural and social needs. They must receive prompt veterinary care when required and have as painless and stress-free a death as possible.

Animals can be used to benefit humans if they are humanely treated, but the benefit to people should be balanced against the cost to the animal. They should not be used in direct combat or for purposes where suffering, injury or distress is likely to be caused.

Humans should strive to provide positive experiences to promote a life worth living for the animals in their care. We should strive for continuous and incremental improvement in the treatment and welfare of animals.

Humans have a responsibility to care for the natural environment of free-living native animals. People should take steps to preserve endangered species and protect native animals from disease where possible.



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Summary

The AVA commends the Victorian Government's aims of the *Cat Management Strategy* to support agencies to work together, identify opportunities for collaboration, and form partnerships to improve cat management outcomes across the state.

As outlined in the [AVA Statement of principles with respect to Animal Welfare](#), it is the welfare of cats that is of prime concern when considering cat management strategies.

The inclusion of veterinary knowledge and subject matter expertise is imperative for matters relating to the welfare of all classes of cats, be they owned or unowned. This is true at both the policy development level and on the ground veterinary care.

There are a large number of stakeholders who can provide meaningful input and action in addressing the issues around cat management. However, the expertise to act does not necessarily correlate to the financial capacity to act. While veterinarians have the expertise to be significant contributors, the majority are working in private veterinary businesses.



Government support is critical for the sustainability of the veterinary profession to enable it to continue providing public good¹ through services such as: subsidised desexing procedures, caring for injured and healthy unowned and stray cats, and educating cat owners.

The AVA provided a series of recommendations in its submissions to the [2020 Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia](#) and to the [Draft updated threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats \(2023\)](#)

Recommendations from these earlier submissions, along with those made in response to this consultation, focus on promoting responsible cat ownership, protecting wildlife and the natural environment, supporting research and data collection, and implementing evidence-based, effective, and humane management strategies for cats.

Discussion

Cats are intelligent, sentient animals that play a significant role in Australian society. Cats form bonds with people and provide companionship and enjoyment. Studies have shown that relationships with animals are positive and important to many people, contributing to health and well-being. In the [Animal Medicines Australia's Pets in Australia report](#), cats continued to be Australia's second most popular pet, with a third of all households housing at least one feline friend (33%, up from 27% in 2019).

Invasive species, ecosystem modification and agriculture in Australia are noted as the key threats impacting on many threatened species.² Worldwide, cats, dogs and rodents are the most damaging invasive mammalian predators. In Australia, introduced species including rabbits, cats and foxes, affect 267 of Australia's 1257 threatened species as listed in the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act). Feral cats are known to threaten 123 of these listed species. Feral cats are likely to have been a major cause in 57% of Australia's 47 extinctions of reptiles, birds and mammals since European settlement, and that trend continues unabated.^{3,4} Cats also impact on human health and animal production through the transmission of zoonotic disease.

The untoward effects of cats on wildlife and transmission of zoonoses are unlikely to be eliminated using current methods, but they can be reduced and managed using humane, long-term strategies which reflect a balanced whole-of-community approach.

The AVA provide the following responses and recommendations to the objectives of The Strategy.

¹ "Public good" is a term used in economics to describe when a good or its benefits are made available to all. They are non-excludable and non-rivalrous. (The theory of externalities, public goods and club goods. Cornes and Sandler, 1996).

² Kearney SG, Carwardine J, Reside AE et al (2019) "Corrigendum: The threats to Australia's imperilled species and implications for a National Conservation Response." *Pacific Conservation Biology*. CSIRO. <https://doi.org/10.1071/PC18024>.

³ Legge S, Woisanski J, Dickman C et al (2020) We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife. *Wildlife Research* <https://doi.org/10.1071/WR19174>

⁴ Woolley LA, Geyle HM, Murphy BP et al (2019) Introduced cats (*Felis catus*) eating a continental fauna: inventory and traits of Australian mammal species killed. *Mammal Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mam.12167>.



1. Objective: Promote cat welfare and responsible cat ownership

1. Develop state-wide accessible, clear, and consistent information resources that all stakeholders can use. Resources should have simple messages on responsible cat ownership and cat containment that acknowledge the value cats bring as pets.
2. Develop specific information resources for multicultural communities and encourage stakeholders to use existing multicultural engagement channels to reach different communities.

Cat ownership is an integral part of the human- animal bond and plays an important and positive role in the health and wellbeing of the community. Benefits can include companionship, health and social improvements and assistance for people with special needs.

It is essential that the physical, social and welfare requirements of the cat are considered before they are acquired, not just the needs and wants of the owners. This commitment and duty of care remains throughout the life of the animal.

The management of cats in Australia must be evidence-based, must prioritise animal welfare, use practices that mitigate negative impacts to animals, and have clear measurable outcome-based objectives which are reported transparently.

By collaborating, veterinarians, cat owners, and community members can work together to minimise the impact of domestic cats and other predators, creating a safer and more harmonious environment for all.

One such example of this work is the [Threatened Species Recovery Hub](#), which in collaboration with the Australian Veterinary Conservation Biology special interest group of the AVA, has developed a range of resources about the impact of cats in Australia [to assist veterinarians in educating pet owners about responsible cat ownership](#).

AVA Recommendations

1. Public awareness and education programs should be in place and regularly evaluated for effectiveness of messaging. These campaigns should include a budget that allows promotion of all aspects of responsible cat ownership, including.
 - Identification,
 - Registration (where applicable),
 - Desexing (pre-pubertal),
 - Ways to reduce the impact of cats on wildlife,
 - The benefits of requiring cats to be contained, and
 - How to optimise a cat's environment (including behavioural interactions) to meet their needs whilst being contained.
2. Further research is encouraged to evaluate the costs and benefits of community support programs to encourage sterilisation and adoption of semi-owned cats.



2. Objective: Increase cat desexing rates

3. Support innovative desexing trials and training programs, such as high-volume clinics and pre-pubertal desexing initiatives.
4. Explore place-based desexing services in regional communities with limited veterinary access. This could include fostering partnerships between stakeholders, including veterinary practices.
5. Invest in affordable desexing options, especially for low-income earners, including targeted grants to assist vulnerable Victorians in desexing their cats

Prepubertal desexing (PPD).

Prepubertal desexing (before 16 weeks of age) is particularly important in cats, which may be able to reproduce from 4 months of age and strongly supported by the AVA as reflected in its policy, [surgical sterilisation of dogs and cats \(ava.com.au\)](http://ava.com.au)⁵.

At the veterinary practitioner's discretion, desexing of cats can be performed from as early as 8 weeks of age and at 1kg bodyweight. Current scientific evidence strongly supports desexing cats before puberty and finds that this does not increase the risk of short-term complications or long-term health effects.⁶

Whilst there is good evidence to support the use of prepubertal desexing, given the differing demographics of veterinarians (gender, veterinarian age and year of graduation, university of graduation, current employment in non-private practice, experience within practice and practice policy) the proportion of the profession recommending PPD is relatively small.⁶

Subsidised desexing is a public good where cost must be able to be recouped.

The AVA requests that consideration be given to the impact on the sustainability of veterinary businesses when expectations, or requests, to further discount an already heavily subsidised procedure (surgical sterilisation) are made. Another factor impacting on veterinary business would be the increased demand/provision of these loss-making surgical procedures which places further pressure on veterinary business that is already under extreme load.

Importantly, surgical sterilisation procedures can only be performed by a registered veterinarian acting under the [Veterinary Practice Act 1997](#). This protects the health, welfare and safety of animals (AVA policy: [Restricted acts of veterinary science](#)).

⁵ Surgical sterilisation is an important tool to reduce unwanted dogs and cats in the community, particularly when combined with relevant community education programs.

Veterinarians should make recommendations about the type of sterilisation procedure and age of sterilisation on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with the client, based on the risks and benefits to the individual animal and current scientific evidence. Relevant regulations and registration requirements should be taken into account.

⁶ [RSPCA Prepubertal desexing report 2021](#)



AVA Recommendations

3. Government financial support is provided to private veterinary business to assist with the provision of [public good](#) (eg sterilisation procedures at subsidised costs to the public) by the private veterinary sector.
4. Support for education of the veterinary profession on the benefits of prepubertal desexing

3. Objective: Expand cat containment

6. Provide cat containment support to councils with curfews to aid in the transition to new requirements.
7. Enhance cat containment education and programs, including reviewing and simplifying enclosure guidelines and conducting research on the welfare of contained cats
8. Foster partnerships with local organisations to assist residents in constructing safe and simple cat enclosures

The AVA supports the containment of cats. Cat containment retains cats on their owners' properties and helps to protect local wildlife from predation, reduces risks to the community and agriculture from zoonotic disease and reduces complaints to local government about nuisance from cats.

Managed in this way, owned cats provide many social benefits and pose limited risk to the community and the environment. Keeping cats contained decreases their risk of injury and certain diseases so they can live safe, healthy and longer lives.

Contained cats require an appropriate environment with enrichment that meets the cats' physical and mental needs, allows expression of natural behaviours, promotes good health and welfare and minimises stress. The way cats are contained must be evidence-based, prioritise animal welfare and minimise negative impacts, and have clear, measurable, and outcome-based objectives which are reported transparently.

Cats must be contained in an environment that meets their physical and mental needs, and in a way that safeguards their welfare, strikes the right balance between cat welfare, safety, and longevity, while also safeguarding the welfare and survival of wildlife and reducing community impacts from roaming cats. To help meet their needs and safeguard their welfare, contained cats should ideally have access to a safe escape-proof contained outdoor environment which includes a range of enrichment resources.

There are also complex potential cat welfare risks with permanent containment, especially if the containment environment does not meet the cat's physical and mental needs. The AVA is concerned that there is a lack of evidence on the outcomes associated with 24/7 mandatory companion cat containment and that it may be associated with complex potential negative consequences.

Support for the introduction of mandatory 24/7 cat containment would need to be based on evidence that it can achieve the stated objectives for cats, wildlife, and the broader



community, and that the potential negative consequences can be eliminated or effectively mitigated. In addition, in jurisdictions where mandatory 24/7 cat containment is introduced, it is vital that there is effective education of the public on how to meet their cats' physical and mental needs under these circumstances. There must also be monitoring and transparent reporting to provide evidence of outcomes (positive and negative); this will be essential to inform a better understanding of potential negative consequences, and strategies to eliminate or effectively mitigate these.

AVA Recommendations

5. The AVA requests that appropriate resources are allocated to include consideration of the financial costs that would be incurred by cat owners, especially those who may be of limited means, to provide physical containment structures, appropriate environmental enrichment, and professional advice on cat behaviour adaptation and management when contained. Also, that reasonable time is provided to allow owners to adopt and afford any new requirements such as additional structures for their homes, to ensure that cat owners are able to comply.
6. Funding for research to develop evidence that 24/7 cat containment can achieve the stated objectives for cats, wildlife, and the broader community, with minimal unintended consequences.

4. Objective: Reduce the impacts of semi-owned and unowned cats

9. Provide ongoing education on the benefits of taking full responsibility for semi-owned cats.
10. Consider implementing shorter holding periods for unidentified cats in shelters and pounds to expedite adoption.
11. Develop guidelines to support the cat behaviour assessment process for adoption suitability.
12. Promote targeted Capture, Desex, Adopt programs in 'hot spots' with high unowned and semi-owned cat populations and need.
13. Explore options to improve cat management on private land.

The AVA supports justifiable reasons for humane control of semi-owned and unowned cat populations as they have significant adverse impacts on wildlife (including risk to endangered or highly vulnerable native fauna), negative impacts on neighbourhood amenities or health and risk to the cats' own safety, health and welfare.

Semi-owned cats may not feel the urge to hunt wildlife if their needs are properly met, including regular feeding and provision of resources that simulate hunting behaviours through play. By fulfilling their dietary needs and engaging their natural instincts in harmless ways, the likelihood of cats preying on wildlife can be significantly reduced.



Veterinarians play a crucial role in this effort, and the AVA strongly encourages them to support and educate cat owners on how to manage their cats' instincts safely and responsibly.

AVA Recommendations

7. Management of semi-owned and unowned cats must be given higher priority by local government. Effective strategies must be implemented by targeting areas of high numbers of free-roaming cats/cat-related complaints and/or high cat admissions and impoundments to shelters and council. Legislation to allow councils to humanely manage semi-owned and unowned populations must be prioritised. Management programs to manage free-roaming owned, unowned and semi-owned cats should be aligned with a One Welfare philosophy aimed at balancing and optimising the wellbeing of animals, humans and the environment.
8. Further research be directed to determining the number and distribution of stray (semi-owned and unowned) cats to facilitate their management, and undertake comprehensive field studies to quantify impact on wildlife populations of owned, semi-owned and unowned domestic cats in specific locations.
9. Cage trapping is used for unowned and semi-owned cats to avoid impacting pet cats in urban and peri-urban areas, combined with an effective education campaign and early desexing programs.
10. Local governments are encouraged to implement other strategies than restricting cat ownership in critical areas to achieve 'cat-freeness'. Cat-free zones may have application with new developments, but this needs to be evaluated.

5. Objective: Manage feral cat populations and impacts

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">14. Implement and monitor humane and effective feral cat control programs informed by decision tools that target and protect key biodiversity values.15. Collaborate with local, interstate, and national authorities to enhance feral cat management in Victoria through knowledge sharing and relevant programs.16. Engage with Traditional Owners to understand the impact of feral cats on biocultural and cultural values and collaborate to recognise 'two ways of knowing' in feral cat management decision-making.17. Support innovative, humane, and effective methods for feral cat control and address knowledge gaps in feral cat management through research and development. |
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Feral cats make up about one third of the cat population in Australia. Occasionally, someone might encounter a sick or injured feral cat and bring it to a veterinarian. All cats, including feral ones, act as both predators and prey, influencing their environment and being influenced by it in return. For feral cats, hunting wildlife is a crucial means of obtaining food. Most general practice veterinarians have limited capacity to manage or influence the behaviour of truly feral cats.



It is imperative that veterinary professionals with the appropriate expertise are included in the development of management plans, especially those relating to feral cat populations, to ensure animal welfare of this class of cats is being addressed.

The following AVA policies should be utilised in the development of such plans;

- [Considering welfare of target and non-target animals in planning vertebrate control programs,](#)
 - Welfare assessment of vertebrate control programs should aim to quantify the welfare impacts on all target and non-target animals likely to be affected.
 - Consideration should be given to the number of individual animals involved and the magnitude of both positive and negative impacts.
 - Control programs should aim to maximise the net welfare of all target and non-target animals, rather than simply considering the direct effect on the program's target species.
 - Management techniques that have higher levels of public acceptance, but poor animal welfare outcomes, should not be chosen over less popular but more humane techniques.
 - Animal welfare should not be compromised by economic factors.
- [Control of native and introduced animals causing damage to agriculture or habitat](#)
 - Control programs to protect the environment, social amenity and agriculture from invasive animals must be carried out humanely. They must use best practice methods based on scientific research and must include monitoring and assessment for continual improvement.
 - Humane control standards must be enshrined in legislation and methods known to be inhumane must not be used in Australia.
 - Continual research must be undertaken to identify more humane options for control of pest animal species.

AVA Recommendations

11. That veterinary knowledge and expertise, including consideration of AVA policies are utilised for managing feral cat populations.
12. Further research is required to investigate the impact of owned and stray cats on native wildlife populations in urban and peri-urban environments.
13. The AVA supports work which aims to identify areas in which threatened species exist, and to determine what management practices can be used to protect them against predation and disturbance by feral cats. A targeted approach, addressing critical areas and adapted to different landscape management techniques, is recommended.
14. Ongoing research is required to improve cat management practices particularly for unowned and semi-owned cats. This may require legislative changes, or interim ministerial approval at the state and local government level to permit the research.



15. Funding and support for feral cat studies which investigate the efficiency and use of management techniques to control cats and protect wildlife.
16. The AVA encourages research on non-lethal methods to mitigate predation impacts by feral cats.
17. Where lethal control measures are used for feral cat control, the objective of the control must be measured by improvements in threatened species status or wildlife population density, not the number of cats killed.

6. Objective: Improve collaboration and information sharing

18. Establish a working group with key stakeholders to drive and monitor Strategy implementation.
19. Share cat management data on centralised platforms
20. Expand opportunities for councils and other land managers to share information and successful cat management practices
21. Distribute key findings summary report of all council Domestic Animal Management Plans

The AVA strongly supports the development and utilisation of a centralised cat data management platform that will streamline and facilitate re-uniting of lost cats and re-homing of un-owned cats, with appropriate processes and timeframes to optimise cat welfare.

To enhance the effectiveness of cat management strategies in Victoria, it is crucial to consider the observations and concerns raised by the AVA to the *Cat management strategy for Victoria background paper*⁷, provided by Animal Welfare Victoria.

The AVA's concern about the lack of provided costs for enforcing containment regulations highlights a significant gap in planning and resource allocation. By expanding opportunities for sharing successful practices, councils can learn from each other about cost-effective enforcement and administration strategies. Additionally, sharing outcomes and strategies across different regions can foster a more cohesive approach, allowing for adjustments based on the specific challenges or successes experienced by each council.

The call for a review and evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of cat confinement policies, as pointed out in the case of [banning of cats in Hall's Gap](#) where no review was undertaken in the 10 years following this initiative, underscores the necessity for ongoing dialogue and shared learning. Councils can benefit from creating frameworks that not only implement policies but also routinely assess and refine these strategies based on collective insights and data from across different jurisdictions.

Distributing a comprehensive summary report that includes the key findings of all council Domestic Animal Management Plans can directly address the AVA's concern about evaluating the impact of changes to cat confinement. This report would serve as a critical tool for

⁷ [Cat Management Strategy for Victoria Background paper | Animal Welfare Victoria](#)



comparing the effectiveness of various approaches and identifying best practices, potentially leading to more unified and effective policies statewide.

The report can also include information on the broader ecological impacts of cat management, responding to the AVA's concern about other factors affecting wildlife populations, such as predation by other species, habitat destruction, and the use of chemicals and pesticides. By integrating these factors into the summary report, councils can gain a more holistic understanding of the environmental challenges and consider multifaceted strategies that address not just cat management but broader ecological conservation efforts.

By addressing these points, the initiatives to expand information sharing and distribute key findings can be significantly reinforced, ensuring that cat management strategies are not only more effective and informed but also integrated into broader environmental and wildlife conservation efforts.

7. Objective: Improve laws and processes

22. Review the cat management framework to identify further options for reform including funding models
23. Investigate aligning cat registration with puberty (4 months) to encourage early desexing.
24. Provide more flexible registration options to encourage desexing, containment, adoption, and cat registration

Improvement in laws and processes are supported by the AVA to facilitate achieving optimal animal welfare outcomes for all classes of cats. Aligning of cat registration with pre-pubertal desexing regimes would be viewed as a positive measure.

To further refine The Strategy, the AVA would like to see the addressing of concerns raised in our input to the *Cat management strategy for Victoria background paper*⁸, previously provided by Animal Welfare Victoria, regarding economic impact assessments. Specifically, the attribution of \$6 billion in long-term costs to cats, which includes speculative links to human health costs from car accidents and mental health due to Toxoplasmosis, needs rigorous verification to ensure causality and accuracy. Furthermore, the presentation of local council revenue as a cost highlights the need for a more nuanced economic analysis that recognises both the costs and income from cat ownership. This can provide a balanced view that supports more equitable policies. Also, the lack of references for council costs linked to cats indicates a gap in The Strategy's research foundation. To improve the laws and processes, regular reviews and updates to The Strategy are essential, including a systematic reassessment of economic data and its sources. By embedding a continuous feedback loop and updating The Strategy based on credible and current data, policymakers can enhance The Strategy's relevance and effectiveness, ensuring it remains well-supported and practically applicable.

⁸ [Cat Management Strategy for Victoria Background paper | Animal Welfare Victoria](#)



AVA Recommendations

18. Government funding to support the public good services that veterinarians provide, including the desexing of all classes of cats, as this is imperative for the sustainability of veterinary practice.
19. Mandated transparency of intake and outcome data is required from all animal shelters and local government facilities to facilitate further research into best cat management practice.
20. Research should be conducted where cat management plans and/or bylaws are implemented to evaluate effectiveness of approaches and to assist with adaptive management.
21. Management options need to be investigated that align with a One Welfare philosophy and protect the environment while avoiding increasing the number of healthy and treatable cats and kittens killed by veterinary staff in shelters, pounds and veterinary clinics with council contracts.

Conclusion

The AVA emphasises the significance of incorporating veterinary expertise in the development and implementation of The Strategy to ensure the welfare of cats remains a priority. Our commitment to animal welfare principles underscores the importance of humane treatment and responsible stewardship of cats, whether they are owned, semi-owned, un-owned or feral.

Initiatives outlined in this strategy that are aimed at increasing cat sterilisation rates, expanding cat containment measures, and reducing the impacts of semi-owned and unowned cat populations are supported by the AVA. We advocate for evidence-based approaches that prioritise the well-being of cats while also considering the needs of communities and the environment.

Government support for the [unpaid public good services](#) provided by the veterinary profession is essential for its sustainability, allowing it to continue offering vital services like discounted sterilisation procedures, care for unowned and stray cats, and education for cat owners. The AVA emphasises the need for thoughtful consideration of the impact on veterinary businesses when proposing additional discounts or demands for already heavily subsidised procedures such as cat sterilisation. With the growing demand for such loss-making surgical procedures, veterinary businesses face increasing financial pressure. Therefore, government financial support for private veterinary practices is crucial to alleviate this strain and enable the continuation of these important public services to the community.

As The Strategy moves forward, the AVA encourages ongoing collaboration, information sharing, and stakeholder engagement to achieve its objectives effectively.

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