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30 June 2024

### Renewal of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy

#### Introduction

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) serves as a pivotal research organisation and advocate for pet welfare across Australia. As a non-profit entity, APWF is dedicated to pioneering evidence-based strategies aimed at reducing cat and dog intake and euthanasia at local government pounds and animal welfare shelters. Under the guidance of Dr. Jacquie Rand, Emeritus Professor of Companion Animal Health at The University of Queensland and a registered specialist in small animal internal medicine, APWF has significantly contributed to urban animal management research. Over the past 16 years, Dr. Rand has led numerous studies, including collaborations with the RSPCA, the Animal Welfare League, and various local government bodies. Her tenure at UQ included teaching Urban Animal Management, and she has co-authored more than 22 peer-reviewed articles focused on this subject, particularly addressing the management of semi-owned and unowned cats.

This submission responds to the Renewal of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS). We have largely focused on domestic animals, and particularly cats, because their welfare is substantially worse than for domestic dogs, and solutions to improve this depend partially on federal government legislative change. For domestic dogs, the greatest improvement in their welfare would come from local government animal management officers embracing an assistive approach rather than focused on an enforcement-based approach to their management, and align domestic dog and cat management with a One Welfare philosophy aimed at improving the welfare of animals, humans and their environments. For dogs at the federal level, consideration of legislation preventing breeding of dogs with known physical characteristics which negatively impact their welfare should be considered. For example, requiring changes in breed standards for English bulldogs so that the brachycephalic syndrome and breathing difficulties are eliminated over time from the breed.

#### Vision for the Strategy

The AAWS which was initiated in 2004 and received endorsement from territorial, state, and federal governments, was implemented six years after initial endorsement and operated successfully from 2010 before its discontinuation in 2014 due to funding cuts by the Liberal government. This cessation of financial support, coupled with a ten-year gap in advancing knowledge and practices, has created significant missed opportunities for enhancements in animal welfare for the prior 10 years. In 2023, a commitment to allocate \$5 million towards the renewal of the AAWS is commendable; it falls short of what is necessary to set up the necessary sector-specific working groups and implement this plan, given the critical role animals play in our communities, agriculture, and industry. The recognition of animals' sentience and their intrinsic value appears insufficiently represented, particularly with the planned full implementation of the AAWS in 2027. This timeline seems to conflict with the strategy's vision of affirming the importance of animal life in Australia, waiting a further three years for the final strategy. It is imperative to recognize the bond between people and animals, and the significant benefits companion animals provide for human health and mental well-being. This aligns with the One Welfare concept, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of animal welfare, human well-being, and environmental health.



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### **Recommendation-**

- **The vision of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy needs to reflect the concept of the One Welfare mindset, which balances and optimizes the well-being of animals, people, and their environment. For example:**
  - **To establish an Australian animal welfare system that is aligned with a One Welfare philosophy, and brings stakeholders together, identifies national priorities with actions and outcomes, and demonstrates to the public and international partners that Australia values the welfare of all animals.**
- **It is recommended that the government provide additional funding for both the implementation of this strategy and ongoing research to advance animal welfare in Australia.**

## **Work Streams**

### **Companion Animals**

#### **Definitions for Cats**

For effective management of cats that are companion animals that is aligned with a One Welfare approach, there is an urgent need to clearly define in the legislation what are feral cats and what are domestic cats APWF recommends cats should be categorized based on how and where they live. All Australian jurisdictions should define all cats with some dependence on people (direct or indirect) living in the vicinity of where people live or work, as domestic cats. Cats that have no relationship with or dependence on humans, that live and reproduce in the wild (i.e. do not live where people live) should be defined as feral cats (in accordance with RSPCA Australia, Commonwealth government TAP 2015 and Victoria state government definitions).

Domestic cats should be excluded from the legal definition of feral cats. Behaviour is an invalid test of whether a cat is feral or domestic and should never be used to label a cat feral. Research shows that pet cats can react with more aggressive behaviours to humans than feral cats when highly stressed. Domestic cats require an average of five days to five weeks in a non-stressful environment before adoptability can be assessed (with a range from a minimum of 3 days to five weeks or longer to assess adoptability) (Rochlitz 1998, Kessler 1997, Ellis 2014, DiGangi 2022, Jacobsen 2022, Slater 2013 and Kerr 2018). Cats should be categorized based on how and where they live. This will enable the implementation of effective domestic cat management strategies aligned with a One Welfare philosophy and that are supported by the community. A clear definition based on how and where cats live will optimise the wellbeing of animals, humans and their environments.

#### **Recommended Definition of Domestic Cats**

To facilitate effective cat management strategies that are aligned with a One Welfare approach, it is recommended that legislation recognise three subcategories of domestic cats including:

- **Owned cats** – these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable, although sociability varies. These cats are also called pet cats.



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- **Semi-owned cats** – these cats are directly dependent on humans and are intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own them. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.
- **Unowned cats** – these cats are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally, such as via food waste bins. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.

### **Recommended Definition of Feral cats**

To facilitate effective feral cat management strategies aligned with One Welfare, feral cats should clearly be defined in the federal and state government legislation as cats that have no relationship with or dependence on humans (neither direct nor indirect), that survive by hunting or scavenging for food, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g., forests, woodlands, grasslands, deserts).

For cat management that is aligned with One Welfare, it is important that legislation recognises that feral cats do not live in the vicinity of where people live and they do not receive food from humans intentionally (direct feeding) or unintentionally (e.g. via food waste bins). Feral cats have none of their needs fulfilled by humans. Feral cats are not found or trapped in the vicinity of where people live or work, are not the subject of nuisance complaints and do not enter Australian council pounds or animal shelters.

This recommendation that the term “feral” not be used to describe cats in shelters or pounds aligns with current practices at RSPCA Australia, which has ceased using 'feral' as a category for intake or euthanasia in its annual statistics, recognizing that feral cats do not engage with shelter or pound facilities. The previously used term “feral” as a reason for euthanasia is now recategorized as “behavior.” (RSPCA Australia Annual Statistics 2022).

Research demonstrates that pet cats can respond with more aggressive behaviours to humans when highly stressed than genuinely feral cats. It is critical that before a decision that a cat is euthanised on behaviour, it is given sufficient time to adapt to a stressful environment. Outcome decisions relating to euthanasia based on behavioural characteristics must be deferred to allow the cat sufficient time to habituate to the unfamiliar environment (e.g., shelter or pound), given the likelihood that these cats will experience high levels of fear in a trap cage or unfamiliar environment. Not allowing a stressed cat to settle into the environment may result in the cat exhibiting signs of being unsocial and ultimately lead to euthanasia.

### **Recommendation**

- **Commonwealth government and state governments adopt cat definitions in accordance with RSPCA Australia recommendations.**

### **Effective Management strategies are needed for Domestic Cats (as defined by RSPCA Australia 2018) that enhance the welfare of animals, humans and their environments.**

Currently the welfare of free-roaming domestic cats (owned, semi-owned and unowned) is suboptimal because their management is not based on science. This negatively impacts the wellbeing of humans, other animals (including native wildlife) and their environments.



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Based on mounting scientific evidence from Australia and overseas, APWF advocates for the expansion of innovative desexing initiatives, such as that undertaken in the city of Banyule (Cotterell 2024). These need to be supported by legislative change/amendments to facilitate uptake, which is mainly at the level of state government and local government by-laws. These programs need clear measurable objectives for each year over 3 to 5 years or more. These programs must be targeted to suburbs of high pound/shelter intake or cat-related calls, and microtargeted within these areas to locations where cats and kittens are most at risk of being impounded or surrendered from. These initiatives also need to be of sufficient intensity. If only targeted to problem suburbs, then approximately 30 cats/1000 residents per year need to be desexed but if intense microtargeting is also applied in these suburbs, then similar decreases in impoundments and euthanasia can be achieved with desexing 10 cats/1000 residents annually. It is critical that budgeting and resources, particularly AMO time, guide the size of the areas to be targeted. Insufficient duration, intensity and/or targeting will mean objectives will not be achieved.

Community Cat Programs (CCPs) are dependent on strong local partnerships. Enhancing relationships with local veterinarians and welfare agencies can facilitate the expansion of low-cost or free desexing services, which are particularly crucial for residents who cannot afford or access veterinary clinics. These programs should be adaptive to the specific needs and constraints of the communities they serve. A limiting factor for roll-out of these programs across Australia is access to sufficient veterinary capacity for the required volume of desexing. Therefore, high-volume clinics need to be supported that include pre-pubertal desexing. Animal welfare agencies also need encouragement, and potentially funding, to prioritise development of high-volume desexing clinics that are open to the public.

Effective cat management transcends the capabilities of any single agency or organisation—it is a community-centric challenge that requires collaborative efforts among all stakeholders. The highest cat impoundments per 1000 residents are often in regional areas which are also low socioeconomic (Chua 2023, Alberthson 2016). It is essential that affordable desexing services are available in regional communities with limited access to veterinary care. This may include mobile clinics for towns with no veterinary clinic in the area, and would also service farming communities. Alternatively, transporting multiple cats in a suitable van to a regional veterinary clinic for desexing is safe for up to two hours of travel, and commonly practised in more remote areas of USA not serviced by a local veterinary clinic. Desexing and transport services could be augmented by fostering robust partnerships among stakeholders, including local veterinary practices. It is crucial to address the socioeconomic barriers to cat desexing, especially for low-income earners, socially isolated individuals and other vulnerable households. We recommend the investment in affordable desexing programs, which should include targeted grants aimed at assisting vulnerable Australians. Such initiatives are essential for broadening access to desexing services, thereby reducing the numbers of unwanted cats. For measurable outcomes to be achieved, it is absolutely essential that cat desexing initiatives be microtargeted to locations where cat-related calls or impounded cats are emanating from.

Positive, assistive engagement of Animal Management Officers (AMOs) with disadvantaged individuals in the community with unsterilised cats is critical for maximizing the effectiveness of these programs. The Banyule model (Cotterell 2024) exemplifies successful microtargeted desexing practices that have meaningfully reduced intake and euthanasia rates by engaging with disadvantaged communities and individuals. High volume desexing clinics located in areas of most need such as the Westside Desexing clinic (Victoria), will need to be subsidized until they are established and are cost neutral. However, many cat carers in disadvantaged suburbs, particularly those caring for multiple cats, will not be able to pay the veterinary costs even at these high-volume clinics, if clinic prices cover all costs. Therefore, subsidies will be still needed



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for these cats to be desexed for free or at very low costs. AMOs are interacting with this demographic, and therefore grants such as offered by state government, such as Animal Welfare Victoria, for councils to enable cats in these situations to be desexed would be highly effective. It is likely a proportion of these people will also need assistance with transporting their cats to the surgery, which would be better use of AMOs time than transporting them for impounding. While programs aimed at encouraging desexing are a positive step, subsidised desexing programs that are not targeted to those most in need may have little to no measurable effect (Frank 2007). These programs may only provide a cheaper option for those who were already planning on getting their cats desexed. It is critically important that programs are microtargeted to locations of need, and do not have barriers or conditions, such as requiring a pension or government-issued card. Vouchers for subsidised desexing at local veterinary clinics may not provide access to affordable desexing services.

Unfortunately, many people in disadvantaged areas still cannot afford cat desexing due to the shortage of veterinarians and the increased cost of veterinary services. Based on RSPCA NSW experience (per comm, Ma 2023), only half the residents who had cats desexed in a targeted and microtargeted program had benefits cards. Socially isolated individuals need higher levels of assistance to improve the welfare of the cats they are caring for. This will also positively impact human welfare and the environment.

### **Recommendation-**

- **To promote and implement effective and proactive domestic cat management strategies across Australia, such as free or subsidized targeted desexing programs. These will assist in reducing cat overpopulation and associated issues, and will enhance the welfare of cats, people and the environment.**

## **Animals in the Wild (native, introduced and feral animals)**

### **Feral Cats**

Feral cats are defined as having no relationship with or dependence (neither direct nor indirect) on humans, which raises the question of how they get into these remote areas. There is a great deal of literature on feral/ perceived feral cats and the problems associated with and potential management of these cats, yet people are never mentioned as being part of the problem and never mentioned as a solution. Implementing humane and effective control programs that consider biodiversity protection, animal welfare, and the potential impacts on non-feral cat populations is where we need these programs to begin to reduce the overflow entering these highly biodiverse areas. Collaboration with local, interstate, and national authorities, as well as engagement with Traditional Owners, will be crucial to the ethical and effective management of feral cats.

### **Recommendation-**

- **Clearly define feral cats at the Commonwealth government and state government levels based on RSPCA Australia 2018 recommendations for cat definitions.**
- **Cease referring to cats as semi-feral cats, those cats that are being provided some care or other resources by humans and that live around farm buildings, in indigenous communities, and at other locations including urban areas. Instead, implement proactive free or subsidised community cat programs in urban and peri-urban areas targeting**



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**vulnerable cat owners, cat carers and semi-owners of stray cats. These programs should also be expanded to farms, indigenous communities and other sites where people care for cats including mining sites, detention centres and jails. Implementing these programs this will reduce the overflow entering or abandoned in the high biodiversity areas.**

### **Lethal Management effects on non-target animals**

Where lethal management is the only option, more humane toxins than 1080 should be used, for example paraminopropiophenone (PAPP) in Felixers spray traps and baits. In this regard, we note that although 1080 is widely used in Australia, it is either banned or use severely restricted in many other countries due to the risks it poses to humans and non-target species.

The Felixer® grooming traps have started to be a novel technique for control of feral cats and foxes. The traps are designed to target these animals through a discriminatory sensor arrangement and algorithm. Once a cat enters the trap, it is sprayed with a lethal dose of 1080 on the fur, and this is ingested when they groom themselves (Read 2019). It is reported by Read (2019) that 82% of feral cats were correctly identified as targets, and that also that no brushtail possums or medium-sized marsupials were targeted, and therefore, the Felixer could provide safe and specific feral predator control (Read 2019). However, a more recent study investigated whether Felixer was safe for marsupial carnivores, with a focus on determining the impact of Tasmanian devils and quolls, because of their similarities in habitat, behaviours, and their physical size (Rickards 2022, Moseby 2020). This study over nine sites and a 4-month trial period, reported the three highest target animal rates by the Felixer were feral cats (48%), followed by the Tasmanian Devil (23%) and the common wombat (12%). Less frequently targeted were hare/ rabbit (9%), the Eastern Grey kangaroo (7%) and the Cape Barron Goose (5%). Based on these findings, the device is therefore not target-specific for cats. In addition, despite contrary claims on the website, the Felixer cannot distinguish between a feral cat or a pet cat that has no collar. Its use should never be approved around human habitation within the reported home range of pet cats (up to 33 hectares; Roetman 2017).

We understand there are responsibilities of government agencies and local councils to implement programs for the management of cats across Australia, depending on the landowner and whether the cats to be managed are feral or domestic. However, these management programs differ greatly depending on the location and classification of cats, from traditional trap, impound, and euthanize or rehome, to programs using baiting. Feral cats are live and reproduce in the wild and survive by hunting or scavenging for food. They do not have any contact with humans and are not dependent on them for food or shelter. Since feral cats do not live in areas frequented by humans, they are not the subject of complaints or found in areas where humans are present. As a result, they are not trapped or disturbed by humans. This information is based on the Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats, published by the Commonwealth of Australia in 2015. It is important to recognize that cats in indigenous communities, around farm buildings, mining sites, detention centres and other more remote areas where there are humans, should be classed as domestic cats.

### **Recommendation-**

- **As part of the development of this strategy, it is recommended that an assessment of the use of 1080 and the risks this poses to non-target animals be further researched, with a view to implementing more humane controls of feral cats, foxes and dogs.**



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- **Effectiveness of management methods of feral species should be evaluated based on positive impacts on the populations of native species of conservation concern that are most vulnerable to dogs, cats and foxes., and should not be based on numbers of feral pests killed.**

### Working Animals

Effective cat management can only be achieved when the value to humans either through companionship and/or as working cats, is considered. For example, in a current study being conducted by APWF of free desexing offered for cats on dairy farms, all farmers stated that cats are considered important working animals because they effectively eliminate costs associated with damage caused by rodents, particularly to dairy wiring, and they reduce food safety issues associated with rodents (Crawford unpublished data 2024). Farmers stated that cats are the preferred method of rodent control, and were preferred over rodent poison because of factors such as effectiveness, cost, baiting's impact on wildlife, and its threat to pets and children. Of note, they mentioned that baits are tax deductible but currently cats are not.

All farmers viewed the cats as working animals and stated they are a necessity on the farm, with one farmer stating that his cats did more work than his working dogs (which are tax deductible). Following desexing of the cats, farmers perceived an improvement in the cats' impact on wildlife with comments stating that they see less (if any) wildlife being killed by the cats after desexing. Following desexing they also noted an improvement in the cats' health and behaviour with improved body condition, less fighting, more friendly, less wondering, less defecation. Most farmers have some sort of bond with some of the cats and these cats have names, they talk to them, they pet them. Therefore, based on this information, it is recommended that an action of this strategy should lobby the Australian Tax office to include cats on farms as working cats and costs of desexing, microchipping, health care, including vaccination, be tax deductible. This will positively impact the welfare of animals, humans and the environment.

### Human-Animal Bond

The human-animal bond is a profound and multifaceted relationship that offers numerous benefits to human health and well-being. Companion animals provide emotional support, reduce stress, and enhance the quality of life for their owners. Research indicates that pet ownership can lead to lower blood pressure, decreased feelings of loneliness, and improved mental health outcomes. For instance, a study by the Human-Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) found that 74% of pet owners reported mental health improvements from pet ownership (HABRI, 2020). The presence of animals in therapeutic settings has also been shown to facilitate recovery and improve patient outcomes (Chandler, 2012). Recognizing and fostering this bond is crucial for public health and underscores the need for policies that support responsible pet ownership and animal welfare. Dog and cat ownership have also been estimated to save over \$1 billion in government spending in Australia on health care because dog and cat owners had significantly fewer visits to a doctor or hospital and less costs for medication than non-pet owners (Headey 1999).

Respecting the intrinsic value of animal lives is a fundamental aspect of ethical animal care and welfare. Animals, as sentient beings, deserve to be treated with compassion and respect, acknowledging their ability to experience pain, pleasure, and emotional states. The One Welfare framework, which integrates animal welfare with human well-being and environmental health, highlights the interconnectedness of these elements and



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promotes a holistic approach to welfare (Pinillos 2016). By valuing animal lives, we not only ensure better welfare for animals but also promote a more compassionate and ethical society. This respect for animals is vital for developing humane and effective animal welfare policies, which ultimately benefit both animals and humans. Of note, exposure of children to inhumane treatment of animals increases their probability of also perpetrating inhuman treatment to animals and sexual and other violence to humans (Plant et al 2018, Ladny 2019, Becker & French 2004, Mota-Rojas 2022).

### **Recommendations-**

- **It is recommended that working animals also serve a purpose as companion animals to many people across varied industries. The bonds formed between people and animals, are not limited to working dogs, horses etc**

## **Challenges**

### **Workforce retention in the veterinary and animal care workers**

Veterinarians are critical to protecting and enhancing the welfare of animals. An inability to access veterinary care and reduced oversight of management of all classes of domestic and feral animals is a welfare issue that urgently needs addressing. The current shortage of veterinarians is a complex problem and will require multiple solutions. High attrition rates and negative mental health are significant issues in the veterinary profession. Financial stress and occupational stress are identified as underlying reasons for the high attrition rates and negative mental health of veterinarians, and these contributing factors must be addressed in order to resolve the shortage. The Australian veterinary profession is associated with low remuneration, high educational debt, high-stress working conditions (abuse from clients, limited resources), frequent ethical dilemmas (euthanasia of healthy or treatable animals), long working hours, high workloads, after hours on-call night work combined with day work, insufficient time off work and poor work-life balance. Due to shortages of veterinarians, remaining veterinarians have the added burden of being less able to take leave, putting them at further risk of burnout and associated negative mental health impacts.

Evidence-based solutions are urgently needed to ensure a sustainable veterinary workforce in the long-term. A robust veterinary workforce is not only critical to maintain animal health and welfare but also has major implications for human health and welfare. Veterinarians are also a fundamental part of 'One Health, One Welfare' which seeks to optimize the health and welfare of people, animals and their environment and recognises the interconnection between these elements. Veterinarians play critical roles in areas such as global health security through the prevention of zoonotic disease outbreaks; safe agricultural systems; wildlife medicine and conservation, biosecurity and maintaining the pet companionship bond which provides significant physical, mental and economic benefits to humans. A critical issue is the euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals by veterinarians. Euthanasia of healthy or treatable animals including pets, stray animals and wildlife (also called financial or convenience euthanasia) represents a frequent ethical dilemma for veterinarians and is a significant occupational stressor for veterinarians in private clinical practice and other contexts such as animal shelters or council pounds (Scotney 2017, AVA 2023). Euthanising healthy or treatable animals is well-documented as causing moral distress in veterinarians (Arbe Montoya 2019, Moir 2019). Moral distress leads to negative mental health impacts (depression, trauma, increased suicide risk), burnout and subsequent attrition.



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Research also shows that employee turnover rates in the animal care sector is positively related to euthanasia rate and that making euthanasia decisions on the basis of factors other than behaviour and health reasons is directly related to increased personnel turnover. The current cost-of-living crisis and concurrent rental crisis have likely increased the financial euthanasia of both pets and stray animals (mainly semi-owned stray cats and kittens), exacerbating this significant occupational stressor.

### Recommendation

- **It is highly recommended that a national Veticare scheme be developed to decrease euthanasia of treatable companion animals and the negative impact on human welfare including veterinarians and vulnerable members of the community.**

Please feel free to contact me to discuss this submission if needed.

Best wishes,

*Jacquie*

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