



Animal Medicines Australia  
ABN 76 116 848 344 | ACN 116 848 344  
18 National Circuit  
Barton ACT 2600, Australia  
P: +61 2 6257 9022  
[animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au](http://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au)

30 July 2020

Mr Ted O'Brien  
Chair  
House of Representatives Standing Committee of Environment and Energy  
PO Box 6021  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via e-mail: [environment.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:environment.reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Mr O'Brien

**Re: Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia. Animal Medicines Australia (AMA) is the peak industry association representing Australia's animal health sector. Our members supply essential veterinary medicines and animal health products that are critical to supporting Australia's \$28 billion dollar livestock industry and the \$13 billion pet industry.

As part of our role, Animal Medicines Australia provides up-to-date data and information on Australia's pet population, trends and community perceptions to inform better policy development and decision making. To assist that objective, AMA has published *Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people*. This report provides authoritative information on Australia's pet populations. A copy of this report is enclosed with this submission.

While AMA recognises the impacts that feral cats have on native wildlife, a comprehensive consideration of the issue should recognise that there are at least three distinct categories of cat populations, each with distinct characteristics. These populations are:

- Pet (domesticated) cats,
- Unowned or partially owned 'stray' cats, and
- Feral cats that have lost all traits of domestication.

Each population may present different risks, and require different strategies to best manage risks to native species. Any recommendations or strategies for domesticated pet cats must also recognise the

role that domestic cats play in Australian society. This includes considering the significant health, social and community benefits associated with pet cat ownership. Our *Pets in Australia* report expressly only relates to domesticated pet cats.

AMA does not agree with the characterisation within the inquiry's terms of reference that all cats are a 'problem' to be solved. This risks promoting negative attitudes towards responsibly managed domestic pet cats and undermine the benefits they provide to their owners. AMA further notes that the terms of reference do not appear to include any reference to animal welfare. This should be a primary concern for any recommendation associated with animal management, and encourages the committee to consider the animal welfare implications of its recommendations.

Our pets, including domestic cats, play multiple, varied and important roles in our lives. They are companions for relaxation, for exercise or for teaching our children empathy and responsibility. They provide companionship, entertainment and a sense of purpose, especially for the elderly and those living alone. Companion animals play important roles in assisting mental health and wellbeing.

Domestic cats are one of the most popular pets in Australia. Approximately 27% of households have a cat. Overall, there are approximately 3.77 million pet cats. Cat owning households have an average of 1.4 cats each<sup>1</sup>. 43% of households have had a cat at some point. AMA's survey found that 77% of pet cats are microchipped and 89% of pet cats are desexed. The report found that 58% of cat owners kept their cats indoors and outdoors, 36% are kept indoors only and 6% were kept outdoors only (it is worth noting that respondents were not asked if their cat's outdoor area was also contained).

Cat owners report positive impacts on their physical and mental health. They report that their cat is a calming presence, promoting optimism and providing purpose for their lives. Many report directly positive impacts on their personal experiences of depression and anxiety. For some, this is about having a friend that cares unconditionally, is non-judgemental and will always be there to listen to worries. For others, pets provide a reason for being, to care for an animal that is dependent upon them. Others simply refer to the joy that their animal brings to their lives.

Australians continue to place increasing value on their pets, with pet owners spending over \$13 billion a year to keep their pets happy and healthy. Significant benefits to physical, mental and community health accrue from policy approaches that embrace responsible pet ownership. Our pet reports continue to demonstrate the changing role of all pets – including pet cats – in our society. Most pet owners describe their relationship with their pet as somewhere between close companion and beloved family member.

Many of these benefits do not simply accrue to pet owners. In 2016, the National Mental Health Commission stated that the cost of mental ill-health in Australia was around \$60 billion<sup>2</sup>. In assisting pet owners deal with difficult and challenging personal circumstances, pet ownership makes owners happier and more engaged.

Pet ownership can also provide social benefits by supporting more connected communities. Owners noted that their pets helped them make connections with neighbours and others by providing a common point of conversation.

AMA welcomes policies and proposals that recognise these significant benefits associated with responsible pet ownership and allow more Australians to enjoy them by removing barriers to pet

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<sup>1</sup> Animal Medicines Australia, *Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people* p6, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/news/2016/december/the-impact-of-poor-mental-health-an-economic-issue>

ownership. We have welcomed commitments by governments in NSW and Victoria to remove some unreasonable barriers to pet ownership in strata rules and standard tenancy agreements.

Responsible pet cat ownership involves measures including providing an appropriate environment, diet and healthcare. There are freely available resources to assist pet cat owners to meet the animal welfare needs of their pet cat while implementing containment measures. This includes resources provided by the RSPCA<sup>3</sup> as well as the Australian Veterinary Association's policy for management of cats in Australia<sup>4</sup>. This policy outlines the importance of enrichment within the pet cat's environment and health measures including permanent surgical sterilisation. The policy also notes the benefits of limiting cat wandering. This includes reducing risks of injury, accident and infectious disease, community nuisance and wildlife impacts.

AMA would welcome nationally consistent policies for responsible pet ownership, including for pet cats that recognise the significant benefits that accrue. Nationally consistent policy could seek to promote four mutually beneficial outcomes:

- Recognise the significant health and welfare outcomes associated with cat ownership (and pet ownership more generally),
- Remove barriers to allow more people to enjoy the benefits associated with responsible pet ownership,
- Promote the health and welfare of domestic cats, and
- Provide information and resources to support responsible cat ownership.

AMA's objective is for Australian communities to embrace the benefits of pet ownership, and support systems that provide responsible owners with the tools to access those benefits while minimising costs, including costs to wildlife.

Should you have any additional questions, I would be pleased to provide further information to assist the committee's inquiry.

Sincerely

*Unsigned for electronic lodgement*

Ben Stapley  
**Executive Director**

**Encl.** Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people

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<sup>3</sup> [www.safeandhappycats.com.au](http://www.safeandhappycats.com.au)

<sup>4</sup> [www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/companion-animals-management-and-welfare/management-of-cats-in-australia/](http://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/companion-animals-management-and-welfare/management-of-cats-in-australia/)