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29 July 2020

House of Representatives Standing Committee on the
Environment and Energy
C/o Committee Secretariat
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Sir/Madam

PHCC Submission – Inquiry into the Problem of Feral and Domestic Cats in Australia

The Peel-Harvey Catchment Council (PHCC) is the NRM regional body responsible for the Peel-Harvey Natural Resource Management (NRM) Region. The following comments are provided within the context of our mission statement : ‘as environmental stewards we will encourage and enable effective catchment management to create a healthy natural environment in the Peel-Harvey by building community education and capacity, influencing and leading critical thought and environmental pride, and exemplifying and implementing best practice’.

Our submission focuses predominantly on impacts of feral cats, while recognising the impacts of domestic cats and supporting advocacy for more effective implementation of the W.A. Cat Act, 2011.

The PHCC has, with support from Western Australian Biodiversity Science Institute (WABSI), Bush Heritage and the Department of Biodiversity Conservation and Attractions (DBCA), successfully established the “Western Australian Feral Cat Working Group” (WAF CWG) – see <https://peel-harvey.org.au/wa-feral-cat-working-group/>. The WAF CWG, a community initiative, has the objective *“To improve the trajectory of WA native fauna conservation outcomes through collaborative, effective, resource-efficient and humane management of feral cats.”* The Working Group is focussed on three (3) Pillars towards an agreed outcome of *“WA biodiversity protected via coordinated, collaborative and effective feral cat management across all land tenures”*. Pillars are: a) Accessible Information; b) Prioritised Research; and c) Coordinated Management.

The WAF CWG is chaired by the former Governor of Western Australia, and is endorsed by the National Feral Cat Working Group and the WA Biosecurity Council. Membership consists of high level representatives of Government and NGO’s. The Working Group is supported by an Advisory Group, enabling wider community representation.

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The PHCC's incentive for supporting the establishment of the Working Group comes from identifying gaps in end user support (information, research and management) which is impeding landscape scale, collaborative management of feral cats. The PHCC also held a state wide feral cat management workshop in 2016 and hosted the WA Feral Cat Symposium in 2018. These have been very popular, drawing out gaps and opportunities for effective feral cat management for W.A., with input from relevant stakeholders from across Australia.

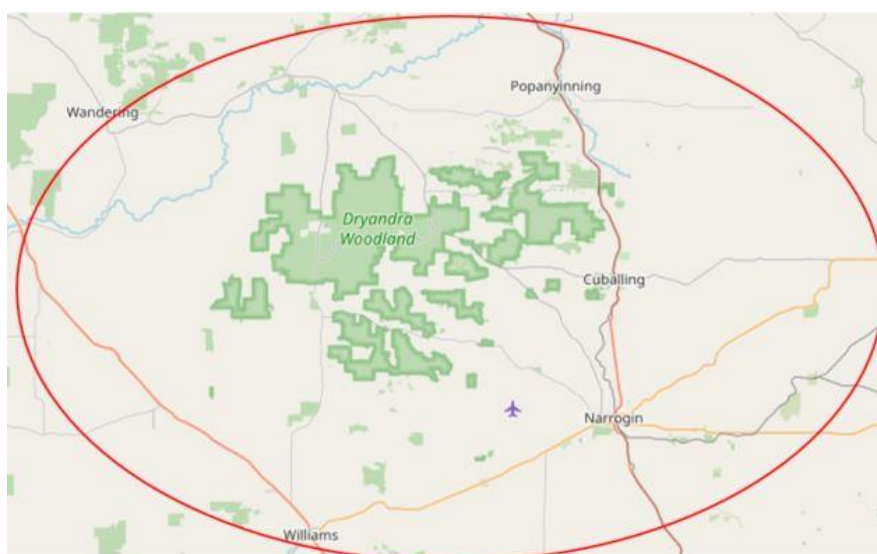
One of the challenges is resources for an executive officer to support the delivery of the identified action plan for W.A.. Funding for this role has been applied for but to date unsuccessful as it has been redirected for COVID priorities. Alternative funding has been sought and we are waiting confirmation of success (or otherwise). Ideally, each state or territory would have a similar collaborative management structure, appropriately resourced by the State or Commonwealth in recognition of the benefits that would be achieved towards State and Commonwealth responsibilities and targets, and these state/territory structures would feed into the National Feral Cat Taskforce, effectively providing a collaborative national framework for feral cat management.

PHCC Responses to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry

A The prevalence of feral and domestic cats in Australia

There are approximately 2.07 million feral cats in natural environments across Australia. Each year cats consume 316 million birds, 596 million reptiles and 900 million mammals, on average. Translated into impact in Western Australia, this represents around 720,000 feral cats consuming 570 million birds, reptiles and mammals across the state, each year.

The map below shows a 2,400km² radius and the 68 recorded feral cats culled by a handful of individual landowners around Dryandra Woodland* in the past 12 months. It can be presumed that this number is higher, as not all removals are reported to the PHCC or recorded on FeralScan. Feral cats weighing in excess of 6.5 kg have been captured and culled by licenced trappers in Cuballing, WA.



It is considered that removal of feral cats supports protection of biodiversity for a 15km² radius and therefore the removal of ~68 cats would mean an approximate improvement across ~1020km².

**Dryandra Woodlands is managed by DBCA, and the PHCC is supporting landowners adjacent to, or near Dryandra to assist with removing feral cats from this significant landscape (noting Dryandra Woodlands is one of only two locations where Numbat populations still occur). See attached case studies for more detail https://peel-harvey.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Numbat-Project_low-res-1.pdf and https://peel-harvey.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Case-Study-23_Farmers-4-Fauna.pdf*

B The impact of feral and domestic cats, including on native wildlife and habitats

The impacts of cats are widely recognised as the primary cause of mammal extinctions and the leading threat to remaining species, refer Australian Government's Threatened Species Strategy and Action Plan regarding tackling feral cats.

Feral cats are listed as a Key Threat in the Australian Government's Threatened Species Strategy, 2015 and it is documented in the Strategy that "the scientific evidence is unequivocal that feral cats are one of the greatest threats to Australia's land-based mammals. They have been a major contributor to the extinction of at least 27 mammals since they were first introduced to Australia. Today, they imperil at least 142 species or more than one third of our threatened mammals, reptiles, frogs and birds." Additionally, the feral cat is host to a number of disease-causing bacteria and viruses, with more than 100 pathogens recognised, 30 of which are also recorded in native mammal species. The diseases such as toxoplasmosis and sarcocystosis can be passed on from feral cats to livestock through feral cats living in feed stored within farming sheds which is then fed to sheep or through ingesting feral cat faeces in pasture or in water. Sarcocystis causes rejection of meat in abattoirs and toxoplasmosis causes abortion in ewes. Both of these diseases also have impacts on humans.

The following are quotes from the Threatened Species Commissioner re impacts:

- **8 May 2020 – roaming domestic cats**

New research from the Threatened Species Hub has estimated that roaming domestic cats are having a greater role in wildlife predation than previously thought. The research compared the predation rates of domestic, stray and feral cats on native and introduced wildlife and sought to understand the toll that varying densities of cats in different landscapes are having. Incredibly, the research estimated that the predation rates of pet cats per square kilometre in residential areas is 28–52 times greater than predation rates by feral cats in natural environments, and 1.3–2.3 times greater than predation rates per square kilometre by feral cats living in urban areas, since pet cats live at much higher densities. Publication here: <https://www.publish.csiro.au/wr/pdf/WR19174>

- **22 July 2020 – post-fire impacts of feral cats on wildlife**

The Summer bushfires had an immense impact on Kangaroo Island and its wildlife including the threatened Kangaroo Island Dunnart. Now a new challenge presents - high numbers of feral cats roaming the post-fire landscape. A high cat density poses a significant threat to wildlife during the post-fire period, with little vegetation left within the fire scar to provide cover for wildlife.

Important work is underway to address this challenge - a large-scale feral cat eradication project is taking place on Kangaroo Island. Kangaroo Island is one of five islands targeted under the Australian Government's Threatened Species Strategy for eradication of feral cats. This is the largest island on which cat eradication has ever been attempted and it will take years to achieve. Partners include the Australian Government, the South Australian Government.... <https://theconversation.com/fire-ravaged-kangaroo-island-is-teeming-with-feral-cats-its-bad-news-for-this-little-marsupial-141201>

- **23 July 2020 – impacts of feral cats on wildlife**

..... Feral cats have been shown to be the main predator of Woylies in both the Upper Warren and Dryandra, with more than 60% of Woylie deaths being the result of feral cats, and more than 20% from foxes.....

Feral cats are prevalent in the Peel-Harvey Catchment, in particular in and around Dryandra Woodland and are known to live on adjoining landholdings in existing infrastructure, including sheds.

The main Dryandra block and satellite blocks are baited 12 times per year, 5 of which use Eradicat (Eradicat research trials started in 2012 and Eradicat has been operational in Dryandra since 2015). Our off reserve efforts are important because it creates a low predator buffer around the reserves. The amount of available prey does not change significantly off reserve so the trapping and baiting continues to be effective. Control efforts off reserve stop re-entry back into reserve where control methods are hampered by the influence of high prey density. Feral cats make a huge impact on populations particularly when the populations are small.

Domestic cats occur in high numbers in urban areas. They are by nature instinctive hunters and known to kill birds and small mammals such as phascogales and lizards. Cats are predators, it is normal behaviour and it cannot be bred out of them. It has been reported to PHCC staff, by some community members, that their pet cats have been known to bring home native mammals.

C The effectiveness of current legislative and regulatory approaches

In July 2015, Commonwealth, State and Territory ministers endorsed a national declaration of feral cats as pests, after tackling feral cats was highlighted as an action area in the Threatened Species Strategy (Department of the Environment 2015b). This declaration placed feral cat management as a priority in threatened species recovery programs, **required ministers to remove any unnecessary barriers to the effective and humane control of feral cats, and resolved to develop a national best practice approach to keeping pet cats** (Webber, B.L. (2020) Increasing knowledge to mitigate cat impacts on biodiversity. WABSI, Perth W.A.).

The WA Cat Act, 2011 has the power to reduce impacts of domestic cats, however, Local Governments require more resources and support to tackle this complex issue, which is obviously not a priority issue for the majority of Local Governments as over the nine (9) years since the Act was declared, Local Governments are (collectively) unable to implement the objectives of this Act and it is unreasonable to place this responsibility on Local Government without adequate support and resources.

Local Governments need more support. Currently under the Cat Act, owned cats must be neutered and microchipped by law and it is illegal to give away “free cats” and breeders must be registered. This is not enough, as dogs must be restrained or kept on private property so too should domestic cats, particularly given how far they roam. (refer: Threatened Species Commissioner post of 8 May 2020 above).

The City of Mandurah in W.A. recently prepared and adopted a Local Law for the management of cats following the deaths of an entire colony of breeding fairy terns at a sanctuary that has been established to try to protect them (see news article here : <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/protected-birds-abandon-wa-sanctuary-after-feral-cat-massacre-20190108-p50q7x.html#:~:text=A%20protected%20colony%20of%20birds,and%20at%20least%20five%20adults..> See Council report here: <https://www.mandurah.wa.gov.au/-/Media/files/com/city%20and%20council/council/council%20and%20committee%20meetings/agendas%20and%20minutes/2019/council/council%20meeting%20agenda%20dec%202017>

While the City is commended for their actions, the Local Law is specific to identified sensitive areas and identifies some of the challenges with implementing the Cat Act.

The PHCC is very pleased that the WA Government listed feral cats on the WA Biosecurity and Agriculture Management (BAM) Act 2007, and particularly that this covers all land tenures, recognizing the role private landowners can play in the effective management of cats. See media release for detail: <https://peel-harvey.org.au/was-native-animals-win-out-over-feral-cats/>. Listing of feral cats not only supports more effective management, it demonstrates to community that Government recognises the impacts and is working to respond to them.

It is recommended that every state and territory have effective legislation for feral and domestic cats and lists cats as pest species under relevant legislation. The PHCC will continue to advocate for feral cats to be listed as a key threatening process under the WA Biodiversity Conservation Act, 2016 and Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2018. The PHCC hold that the National Declaration on Feral Cats should be overarching framework to hold States to listing cats on all relevant legislation.

D The effectiveness of Commonwealth action and cooperation with states and territories on this issue, including progress made under the Threat Abatement Plan, national framework and national declaration relating to feral and domestic cats in Australia

The Threatened Species Strategy was published in 2015 and annual progress reports are prepared and made publicly available. This is a good step in understanding broader trends of effectiveness, against the data collected for this purpose. It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of actions under the Threat Abatement Plan in a thorough manner and it is strongly felt that there needs to be more thorough data input and dissemination across states and territories, feeding into a national tally.

The PHCC is unaware of how the National Declaration on Feral Cats has impacted action in W.A.. This may have assisted in prompting the State to list Feral Cats under the BAM Act (along with significant community pressure). We are also unaware if this has influenced cats being considered to be listed on the Biodiversity Conservation Act, or providing greater support for the implementation of the Cat Act, or other feral cat actions.

The listing of feral cats should be nationwide and standardised across all states and territories on all Biosecurity and Biodiversity Acts and regulations and support provided to the relevant agencies to enforce these laws.

E The efficacy (in terms of reducing the impact of cats), cost effectiveness and use of current and emerging methods and tools for controlling feral cats, including baiting, the establishment of feral cat-free areas using conservation fencing, gene drive technology

There is no landscape scale effective management methods at this stage. NGO's, with Government are focusing on determining effective tools and the PHCC is pleased that WABSI has taken a leadership role in W.A. to prepare a research plan for W.A., "Increasing knowledge to mitigate cat impacts on biodiversity" - <https://wabsi.org.au/category/publications/research-plans/>.

There must be a greater level of support from state and commonwealth governments to provide resources, information sharing and enabling proven emerging options for management. Barriers to landowners being involved have to be recognised and removed. It is senseless that landowners that are willing to support feral cat management have to pay license fees to the State (1080 license). While appropriate control must be in place for the

issue of 1080, these types of disincentives (financial) must be recognised and removed. In the Peel-Harvey we help landowners through the process of applying, and pay their fees, because we recognise the value they bring to this national problem.

Community needs to be supported to work together on the range of feral animal control measures which are currently baiting, trapping and shooting. Other methods are currently not available and more effort is needed to make these additional control measures such as felixers available to organisations such as NRM's to trial with landholders. In the PHCC we have earned the trust of landholders and need to be able to trial new methods to support landholder efforts. More collaboration is needed as well as education programs. PHCC do this through our Numbat Neighbourhood and Farmers for Fauna projects but resources are limited and these projects have end dates so future support is uncertain.

F The efficacy of import controls for high risk domestic cat varieties to prevent the impacts of feral and domestic cats, including on native wildlife and habitats

PHCC strongly opposes the importation of any additional domestic cat varieties (especially cross-breeds with larger species), given that any introduction of cat genetics can be expected to eventually escape into the feral population, with the potential to exacerbate current impacts of feral cats on native wildlife. There is no reasonable necessity to enable importation of any cat varieties and this should be a priority action to ban them. This would also assist with a recognised national statement that Australians hold the future of native animals as a higher priority than domestic cat varieties.

G Public awareness and education in relation to the feral and domestic cat problem

There appears to be a growing awareness of the impacts of feral and domestic cats and thus the social license to manage them in order to protect native species appears to be becoming more acceptable across the general community. Efforts of NGO's and the Threatened Species Commissioner (current and past) can be commended for these efforts.

The PHCC recommends appropriate resources be allocated for a nation-wide public campaign to raise awareness and support management, particularly in 'hotspot' areas (chronic and/or temporal, e.g. post fire impacts).

PHCC is dedicated through our projects, in particular the Numbat Neighbourhood project which works in partnership with DBCA, Project Numbat, DPIRD, local landholders and local governments to provide education to the community on the impacts of feral cats. PHCC provide support through working with DPIRD to provide classroom 1080 training, funding towards 1080 baits, providing cage traps, cat food and reward efforts with vouchers. We also work with Project Numbat on education of school children on the impacts of feral cats (and foxes) as well as domestic cats on threatened species, including the Numbat which is an iconic species in Dryandra Woodland and our State's fauna emblem.

More support is required to change attitudes, for example, that feral cats should be left around farm sheds and similar to control rats and mice and provide greater awareness of the risks associated with feral cats, including emphasising the diseases they carry and impacts on threatened fauna and livestock. Farmers adjacent to Dryandra have witnessed feral cats chasing down newborn lambs.

H The interaction between domestic cat ownership and the feral cat problem, and best practice approaches to the keeping of domestic cats in this regard

More support is needed to local governments and more responsibility written into the Cat Act for owners. They should be treated the same way as dogs, and must be contained within their property either in house or in a cat run for example. Refer 'C' above.

Summary of Key Points

- Feral cats occur across Australia and are having a devastating impact on native wildlife and agricultural pursuits, presenting a threat not only to biodiversity but the economic benefits Australia's biodiversity brings to the overall economy;
- Investment in developing more effective methods for the control of feral cats should increase with an aim for increasing the prevalence of native (particularly threatened) species to the broader landscape;
- There must be a greater level of support from state and commonwealth governments to provide resources, information sharing, research for most humane and cost effective management options and enabling proven emerging options for management.

Recommendation

- The National Declaration: Feral Cats as Pests be supported by the preparation and appropriate funding for a 20 year Action Plan for the management of feral cats. This should hold Government to account for implementing the Declaration, with quantifiable milestones and outcomes for each state and territory, with the annual results being made public. This should be supported by an independent Chair, feeding into the National Feral Cat Taskforce, who in turn feed into Working Groups or similar for each and every state or territory;
- Each state or territory should have a collaborative management structure, appropriately resourced by the State or Commonwealth in recognition of the benefits that would be achieved towards State and Commonwealth responsibilities and targets, and these state/territory structures would feed into the National Feral Cat Taskforce, effectively providing a collaborative national framework for feral cat management.
- Every state and territory have effective legislation for feral and domestic cats and lists cats as pest species under all relevant legislation. The listing of feral cats should be nationwide and standardised across all states and territories on all Biosecurity and Biodiversity Acts and regulations and support to the relevant agencies to enforce these laws.

- Local Governments need more support in W.A. to implement the Cat Act, 2011 for the management of domestic cats.
- There must be a greater level of support from state and commonwealth governments to provide resources, information sharing and enabling proven emerging options for management, with a funded 'Executive Officer' for each state and/or territory.
- Immediate cessation of the import of any cat species into Australia.
- A nation-wide public campaign to raise awareness and support management, particularly in 'hotspot' areas (chronic and/or temporal, e.g. post fire impacts).
- Support greater level of research to ensure that most humane, cost effective methods of control are identified and supported for implementation.

Thank you for undertaking this inquiry. Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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Jane O'Malley
Chief Executive Officer