



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
House of Representatives Standing Committee on the
Environment and Energy report:

Tackling the feral cat pandemic

FEBRUARY 2022

Background

On 18 June 2020, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Energy, following a referral from the Minister for the Environment, the Hon Sussan Ley MP, resolved to conduct an inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia, with reference to:

1. the prevalence of feral and domestic cats in Australia
2. the impact of feral and domestic cats including on native wildlife and habitats
3. the effectiveness of current legislative and regulatory approaches

The Committee tabled its report on 4 February 2021.

Summary

The Australian Government recognises feral cats are a serious vertebrate pest in Australia that have severe to devastating effects on native fauna. The Government has long recognised predation by feral cats as a threat to Australian fauna with a listing as a key threatening process under the *Endangered Species Protection Act 1992* and inclusion on the list of Key Threatening Processes of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* at commencement. A statutory Threat Abatement Plan was made with its most recent iteration in 2015.

National leadership on the management of feral cats was spearheaded by the Threatened Species Strategy's (2015) feral cat targets and supported by the Threat Abatement Plan for predation by feral cats. The Australian Government is investing in improving knowledge about feral cats and developing control tools for their management, including investment of over \$3.24 million in research on feral cats via the first National Environmental Science Program which has deepened our understanding of where cats live, what they eat and how to effectively control them. The Government has also mobilised more than \$7.2 million to support the development of new feral cat control tools like the Curiosity bait for feral cats and Felixer Grooming Trap. The Australian Government also invests directly in on-ground interventions to manage predation by feral cats. Action is focused on delivery of recovery actions for species listed under the EPBC Act such as those that are threatened or migratory, or where the Commonwealth has responsibility for management such as the Parks estate.

This is supported through programs such as the National Landcare Program and Environment Restoration Fund. Examples of on-ground action include the eradication of feral cats from islands, building fenced reserves and deployment of traps around critical threatened species populations.

The National Feral Cat Taskforce, established and chaired by the Threatened Species Commissioner, provides a forum for all governments and feral cat experts to effectively collaborate on strategies and action for both feral and domestic cats. However, the Australian Government alone cannot abate the threat from feral cats. It requires the combined efforts of local, state, territory and Australian governments, together with the actions of landholders, communities, traditional owners, the private sector and non-government organisations who deliver biodiversity protection and conservation.

The Australian Government remains committed to playing its part through the revision of the Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats to guide investment and effort, and through partnering on strategic research and on-ground action to minimise the spread and impacts of feral cats.

The new Threatened Species Strategy 2021-2031 and five-year Action Plan is a pathway forward for prioritising action and investment, setting the direction for efforts including on feral cat management, building on the previous work undertaken by the department.

The Australian Government agrees or agrees-in-part to recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, and agrees to parts of recommendations 5 and 6. The Australian Government will use a combination of extended effort through existing mechanisms and new initiatives to delivery action to reduce the impacts of predation by feral cats and assist local governments and communities to instigate best practice domestic cat management.

Response

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government recognise and prioritise the problem of feral cats in Australia consistent with its status as a matter of national environmental significance, that must be addressed effectively to ensure the continued survival of Australia's native wildlife and ecological communities.

Response

AGREED, with note

Predation by feral cats remains a Key Threatening Process under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation 1999 Act (EPBC Act). This is a priority for the Australian Government with a review of the Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats to be undertaken this year by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee.

The Threatened Species Strategy 2021 – 2031 is a pathway forward for prioritising action and investment, setting the direction for efforts which include feral cat management, and building on the work of the first Threatened Species Strategy 2015 – 2020.

In 2021, the first ever national Feral Cat and Fox Management Coordinator was appointed by the Australian Government to lead action on feral cats, providing landholders with best practice solutions and coordinated action on the ground. The focus initially will be in areas recovering from the 2019-20 bushfires and threatened species.

It is important to note that Key Threatening Processes are not listed as matters of national environmental significance under the EPBC Act.

Recommendation 2a

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake a body of work to improve understanding of the impact of feral, stray and domestic cats in Australia by:

- a. Collaborating with state and territory governments and other relevant stakeholders to develop and adopt a consistent definition of feral, stray and domestic cats, to be applied across national, state, territory and local government legislative and regulatory frameworks relating to cats.

Response

AGREED

The Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats (2015) sets out the Australian Government's definition of feral, stray and domestic cats. This definition has been adopted by many including some state and territory jurisdictions.

The Government recognises that multiple definitions of cats (*Felis catus*) from domesticated to wild continue to exist, to serve the requirements of people to classify cats for different management purposes and public perceptions on the meaning of the definitions. The Government will continue to work with relevant stakeholders to refine and align definitions where the management intent is the same, through collaborative platforms such as the Feral Cat Taskforce.

The Feral Cat Taskforce was formed in 2015 to support the implementation of the first Threatened Species Strategy and includes representatives from the Government, all state and territory governments, researchers, non-government organisations and practitioners.

Recommendation 2b

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake a body of work to improve understanding of the impact of feral, stray and domestic cats in Australia by:

- b. Commissioning further research on:
 - i. the prevalence, impact and control of feral, stray and domestic cats including in urban environments;
 - ii. emerging cat control methodologies such as gene drive technology;
 - iii. the impacts and management of toxoplasmosis and other cat-borne diseases on native species and productive farmland; and
 - iv. the relationship between habitat degradation and cat predation, including with respect to bushfire impacts.

Response

AGREED

The Australian Government recognises the important role that science and research play in supporting the effective mitigation of the impacts, and management, of pest species.

The National Environmental Science Program is a long-term commitment by the Government to environment and climate research. The first phase invested \$145 million (2014-15 to 2020-21) into 6 research hubs, including an investment of over \$3.24 million into feral cat research. This research filled a range of critical knowledge gaps including improving our understanding of the national populations of feral, stray and domestic cats, quantifying the toll of cats on our wildlife and highlighting the need for a more strategic expansion of the national safe haven network.

Building on this work, the second phase of the National Environmental Science Program is investing \$149 million over 6 years (2020-21 to 2026-27) in 4 new research hubs. The hubs will develop applied environmental science to support decision-makers from across the

Australian community, including Indigenous communities, achieve positive environmental, social and economic outcomes. Research planning for the National Environmental Science Program is ongoing but will have a component that addresses the ongoing research needs around the threat from predation by feral cats and foxes on Australian animals.

The Government has also released a new Threatened Species Strategy (2021-2031) which includes action areas such as mitigating new and established pests, and knowledge and tools, both of which will support a focus on feral cat on-ground action and research. The Strategy is available at:

<https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/strategy-home>

Recommendation 3a

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a clear strategy to inform its resourcing of and response to the problem of feral cats, including through a 'reset' of its current policy and planning. This should comprise:

- a. A new iteration of the Threat Abatement Plan for predation by feral cats addressing:
 - i. how it is to be evaluated, implemented, and resourced; and
 - ii. a requirement that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to develop complementary and localised plans.

Response

AGREED-IN-PART

The Threat Abatement Plan for predation by feral cats establishes a national framework to guide and coordinate Australia's response to the effects of predation by feral cats on biodiversity. It identifies the research, management, resourcing and other actions needed to ensure the long-term survival of native species and ecological communities affected by feral cats. The Minister for the Environment will consider the feasibility, effectiveness and efficiency of the Threat Abatement Plan, as required by the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

Should the Minister decide a new plan is required, the Government will consult closely with state and territory governments on actions required in a new threat abatement plan during its development, and provide a framework for state and territory governments to develop complimentary and localised plans. The Minister will seek, and consider, the advice of the Threatened Species Scientific Committee on the need for and content of the plan.

Recommendation 3b

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a clear strategy to inform its resourcing of and response to the problem of feral cats, including through a 'reset' of its current policy and planning. This should comprise:

- b. A revised Threatened Species Strategy comprising:
 - i. relevant targets focused on the rehabilitation of threatened species and ecological communities, accompanied by details of how each target will be achieved, resourced and reported; and
 - ii. restatement of the need to cull feral cats, with new targets for culling consistent with contemporaneous prevalence data.

Response

AGREED-IN-PART

The 2015 Threatened Species Strategy made a significance difference in tackling the impact of feral cats on Australia's wildlife.

The Australian Government released the new ten year Threatened Species Strategy 2021-2031 earlier this year.

The Threatened Species Strategy is the Government's framework for prioritising action and investment, setting the direction for efforts to recover our threatened plants, animals and ecological communities over the next ten years.

The 10-year Strategy builds on the momentum of, and lessons learnt from the first Strategy. A focus of the Strategy and accompanying Action Plan is mitigating new and established pests.

The Strategy is available at:

<https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/strategy-home>

The Threatened Species Strategy 2021-2031 is underpinned by consecutive five-year Action Plans. These Action Plans identify priority species and places, concrete actions and practical, measurable targets to assess progress. The first Action plan is for 2021 to 2026.

Feral cat management will be considered under the first Action Plan's mitigating new and established pest action area. Targets that may be identified within the first Action Plan to mitigate the impact of cats will be outcomes focussed and support best practice control to provide more effective threatened species outcomes.

Recommendation 3c

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a clear strategy to inform its resourcing of and response to the problem of feral cats, including through a 'reset' of its current policy and planning. This should comprise:

- c. Appropriate consideration of reform opportunities identified through the current review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 and its administration, including but not limited to:
 - i. the extent to which recovery plans are created and their actions resourced.

Response

AGREED

The Australian Government has committed to work through the full detail of the recommendations of the EPBC Act Review with stakeholders, including in relation to addressing threats, such as feral cat predation, through more effective and coordinated planning processes. On 16 June 2021 the Minister for the Environment released *A pathway*

for reforming national environmental law and an accompanying *Proposed timeline for EPBC Act reforms* which describe the reforms underway, the next steps and when the Government will engage with stakeholders on the recommendations of the review. These documents are available on the Department's website:

<https://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/about/environmental-law-reform>

EPBC Act conservation advices and recovery plans identify actions to stop the decline of, and support the recovery of listed threatened species or ecological communities. Where predation by feral cats is identified a threat, this is included within these relevant documents. The implementation and monitoring of recovery plans and conservation advices is shared cooperatively by a range of stakeholders, including all levels of government, not-for-profit organisations, research organisations, Indigenous communities, landowners, and community groups.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government spearhead, in partnership with the states and territories, an expansion of Australia's network of predator-free safe-haven enclosures and feral cat-free islands through a new program, Project Noah, as a new national conservation mission.

The expansion of feral-free areas should be opportunistic in terms of land and island availability, but also specifically identify and reference species that can be saved through Project Noah, as part of the Conservation Advices, Recovery Plans and Key Threatening Processes. Governments should work to create feral-free areas across a range of ecosystems and be ambitious in their scale.

Wherever possible, Project Noah projects should be developed in partnership with communities, the private sector and philanthropic groups, based on proven models such as those that have been developed with organisations like the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

Response

AGREED-IN-PART

The Australian Government recognises the important role that feral-predator-free safe havens can play in conserving and protecting native wildlife.

The first Threatened Species Strategy supported implementation of a national network of safe havens through setting of ambitious targets and investment, including the eradication of feral cats from five islands and establishing 10 mainland feral-cat-free exclosures.

The Government has also mobilised \$10 million under the Environment Restoration Fund Safe Havens Commitment to strategically identify and establish island safe havens and mainland feral predator-free fenced areas. This commitment has focussed on improving the representation of predator susceptible mammals within the national safe haven network.

The Government does not agree that a new program 'Project Noah' is required to expand Australia's network of predator-free safe-haven enclosures and feral cat-free islands. Instead, the Government, through the Feral Cat Taskforce, will share knowledge of the national safe haven network that is being expanded through the combined efforts of governments, non-government organisations, research community and the private sector.

The Government will continue to work with safe haven partners to expand the national network and improve the representativeness of species over coming years. The Government will work with stakeholders and community groups to increase collaboration around safe havens.

Recommendation 5a

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with the states and territories, develop a clear strategy for the management of stray and domestic cats. The strategy should feature the following measures: The expansion of feral-free areas should be opportunistic in terms of land and island availability, but also specifically identify and reference species that can be saved through Project Noah, as part of the Conservation Advices, Recovery Plans and Key Threatening Processes. Governments should work to create feral-free areas across a range of ecosystems and be ambitious in their scale.

1. Develop and disseminate best practice domestic and stray cat management strategies, including increasing public awareness of the impact of cats on Australia's native wildlife and habitats.

Response

AGREED-IN-PRINCIPLE

The Australian Government agrees that the development and dissemination of best practice domestic and stray cat management strategies is a sound recommendation, and notes that there has been educational material developed on this topic by organisations including the RSPCA's document *'Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia.'*

The Government will consult with the Feral Cat Taskforce to determine what further education material needs to be developed and, where appropriate and within the remit of the Government, will assist Feral Cat Taskforce members with the dissemination of educational material on best practice cat management options to a wider range of community, Indigenous and other local groups. Some of this work is already being carried out by the Feral Cat Taskforce members, for example,

- promoting responsible cat ownership in the Tiwi Islands (Northern Territory) – a collaborative project between the Australian Government, Tiwi Land Council and Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC) focussed on community education and desexing of domestic cats.
- supporting the Bruny Island (Tasmania) community to practice responsible pet ownership practices through engagement under the Bruny Island Feral Cat Eradication Program. Kingborough Council, the Local Government Authority, have implemented a strict by-law across the island requiring compulsory desexing and microchipping of domestic cats, keeping cat/s within an owner's property boundaries, a limit of two cats without a permit, and the prohibition on feeding stray cats.

- The National Environmental Science Program Threatened Species Recovery Hub developed and delivered public awareness communications about best practice domestic cat management to prevent predation of native species.

Recommendation 5b

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with the states and territories, develop a clear strategy for the management of stray and domestic cats. The strategy should feature the following measures: The expansion of feral-free areas should be opportunistic in terms of land and island availability, but also specifically identify and reference species that can be saved through Project Noah, as part of the Conservation Advices, Recovery Plans and Key Threatening Processes. Governments should work to create feral-free areas across a range of ecosystems and be ambitious in their scale.

2. Develop a positive national cat ownership education campaign to be delivered through the Australian Veterinary Association, local councils and community groups.

Response

AGREED-IN-PRINCIPLE

The development of a national domestic cat ownership education campaign focused on best practice management for individual welfare while protecting wildlife is supported by the Australian Government in principle but should be led by local councils as the regulators with an understanding of their specific socio-economic demographic.

The Australian Government would be supportive if a National Australian Veterinary Association or another similar organisation wish to develop and deliver such a campaign with or through local governments.

Recommendation 5c

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with the states and territories, develop a clear strategy for the management of stray and domestic cats. The strategy should feature the following measures: The expansion of feral-free areas should be opportunistic in terms of land and island availability, but also specifically identify and reference species that can be saved through Project Noah, as part of the Conservation Advices, Recovery Plans and Key Threatening Processes. Governments should work to create feral-free areas across a range of ecosystems and be ambitious in their scale.

3. Reduce the barriers to responsible domestic cat ownership with programs to support desexing, registration, and microchipping for domestic cats, as well as night curfew and containment programs.

Response

AGREED-IN-PRINCIPLE

The Australian Government agrees in principle with this recommendation, however it is not within the government's mandate to assist with microchipping, desexing and registration of domestic cats, this falls within the jurisdiction of local councils. The Australian Government acknowledges that local governments are the closest tier of government to the community and have a critical role in delivering vital services and ensuring quality of life for communities across Australia in good times and bad.

The Government supports removing barriers to responsible domestic cat ownership and is supportive of other stakeholders such as the Australian Veterinary Association or RSPCA running a positive national cat ownership education campaign which supports desexing, registration, microchipping and 24/7 containment programs. Containment programs are more effective than night curfews and is what the Australian Government suggests is implemented by local government.

Recommendation 5d

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with the states and territories, develop a clear strategy for the management of stray and domestic cats. The strategy should feature the following measures: The expansion of feral-free areas should be opportunistic in terms of land and island availability, but also specifically identify and reference species that can be saved through Project Noah, as part of the Conservation Advices, Recovery Plans and Key Threatening Processes. Governments should work to create feral-free areas across a range of ecosystems and be ambitious in their scale.

- d. Require all local governments to actively consider whether night-time curfews should be put in place for all or part of their areas of responsibility.

Response

NOT AGREED

The Australian Government considers that containment programs are more effective than night time curfews and is what the Australian Government suggests is implemented by local government.

Therefore, the Government would instead recommend local governments actively consider 24/7 containment options in their municipalities. However, it is not within the scope of the Government to require local councils consider containment or night-time curfews.

Recommendation 5e

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with the states and territories, develop a clear strategy for the management of stray and domestic cats. The strategy should feature the following measures: The expansion of feral-free areas should be opportunistic in terms of land and island availability, but also specifically identify and reference species that can be saved through Project Noah, as part of the

Conservation Advices, Recovery Plans and Key Threatening Processes. Governments should work to create feral-free areas across a range of ecosystems and be ambitious in their scale.

- e. Design and implement a pilot program for subsidised or free desexing of pet cats in areas of high need, redeemable through vouchers issued by veterinarians or local governments in targeted locations.

Response

NOT AGREED

This would fall into the jurisdiction of local councils. There are situations where the Government may consider supporting programs for domestic cat desexing, where they lie within a broader threatened species recovery program, such as the collaborative project between the Australian Government, Tiwi Land Council and Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC) promoting responsible cat ownership in the Tiwi Islands (Northern Territory).

Recommendation 6a

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a governance framework to give effect to the new strategies and programs outlined in recommendations 3, 4 and 5. This should include governance measures that:

- a. Expand the membership of the National Feral Cat Taskforce to include experts on agricultural and veterinary issues, including the ethical treatment of animals, and any other matters deemed relevant.

Response

AGREED

The Feral Cat Taskforce brings together members of the Commonwealth Government (including environment and agriculture representatives), state and territory governments, non-government organisations, researchers and practitioners.

Recommendation 6a recommends that the Taskforce membership is expanded to include experts on agricultural and ethical treatment of animals. The existing membership of the Taskforce already includes experts on these matters:

The Government agrees to expand the membership of the Taskforce to include experts on veterinary issues and will work with Taskforce members to identify a suitable representative.

Recommendation 6b

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a governance framework to give effect to the new strategies and programs outlined in recommendations 3, 4 and 5. This should include governance measures that:

- b. Strengthen the remit of the National Feral Cat Taskforce to enable it to lead a process to harmonise existing feral cat legislation and regulation across Australia. In particular, a strengthened Taskforce should:

- i. review the effectiveness and consistency of current state and territory feral cat legislation, regulation and management plans;
- ii. develop principles for the harmonisation of existing state and territory feral cat-related legislative and regulatory instruments to the best-practice standard; and
- iii. develop principles for best practice cat management plans.

Response

AGREED-IN-PART

The Feral Cat Taskforce is already undertaking a body of work to review and harmonise state and territory feral cat legislation, regulation and management plans, based on the endorsement of this work by the Meeting of Environment Ministers (Melbourne, 15 July 2015). Most states and territories now have harmonised feral cat legislation, and the Minister for the Environment and Government will continue to encourage alignment of legislation and regulation to allow appropriate and effective feral cat management across all of Australia.

The Government has also supported work to develop principles for best practice cat management plans and will continue to work with stakeholders to have these principles implemented appropriately.

Recommendation 6c

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a governance framework to give effect to the new strategies and programs outlined in recommendations 3, 4 and 5. This should include governance measures that:

- c. Establish a mechanism for collaboration with state and territory Environment Ministers and relevant agencies, to improve harmonisation of legislative and

regulatory approaches, and best practice principles, in relation to domestic and stray cats.

Response

AGREED

The Feral Cat Taskforce will continue to undertake this work and a key focus will be to improve the cohesion of legislative and regulatory approaches, and collate best practice principles, in relation to domestic, stray and feral cats.

Recommendation 6d

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a governance framework to give effect to the new strategies and programs outlined in recommendations 3, 4 and 5. This should include governance measures that:

- d. Remove barriers to the full implementation by all jurisdictions of the National Declaration: feral cats as pests.

Response

AGREED

At the Meeting of Environment Ministers (Melbourne, 15 July 2015), Ministers endorsed the National declaration of feral cats as pests. As part of this declaration, Ministers agreed to review arrangements within their respective jurisdictions and, where necessary, to remove unnecessary barriers to effective and humane control of feral cats.

Since the commitment was made, the Government has supported jurisdictions in removing legislative barriers to feral cat control. Feral cats are now listed as pest species across many jurisdictions. The Government has also worked with jurisdictions to remove legislative barriers to accessing feral cat control tools such as baits and traps.

The Government recognises that although significant progress has been made nationally, there remains opportunities to further remove barriers. The Government will continue to work with jurisdictions through platforms such as the Feral Cat Taskforce and Environment Ministers to fulfil the commitment made in July 2015.

Recommendation 6e

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a governance framework to give effect to the new strategies and programs outlined in recommendations 3, 4 and 5. This should include governance measures that:

- e. Facilitate collaboration with relevant Commonwealth agencies, scientists and states and territories to consider the most effective feral cat control methods, and provide advice on the broad scale usage of these methods.

Response

AGREED

The Australian Government facilitates collaboration with Commonwealth agencies, scientists and states and territories through the Feral Cat Taskforce. The Taskforce meetings discuss feral cat control methods and expert advice is available on the broad scale use of these methods.

Recommendation 6f

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a governance framework to give effect to the new strategies and programs outlined in recommendations 3, 4 and 5. This should include governance measures that:

- f. Ensure that local governments are resourced appropriately to deal with cats, including requiring all local governments to develop and implement domestic cat management plans consistent with relevant state and territory laws.

Response

AGREED-IN-PRINCIPLE

The Australian Government agrees in principle with the recommendation to ensure local councils are resourced to deal with cats and that local councils should have cat management plans.

However, it is not within the scope of the government to resource local councils for cat management or stipulate how they should be resourced. The Feral Cat Taskforce may be a forum for states and territories to discuss and collaborate on best practice domestic cat management plans. Should there be a request, the taskforce may be able to facilitate these discussions.

Recommendation 6g

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a governance framework to give effect to the new strategies and programs outlined in recommendations 3, 4 and 5. This should include governance measures that:

- g. Develop principles for local government animal management staff to manage local cat issues, including easily accessible resources.

Response

AGREED-IN-PRINCIPLE

The Australian Government agrees in principle with the recommendation to develop principles for local government animal management staff to manage cat issues; however, it is not within the scope of the Australian Government to provide principles to local councils for domestic cat management. This is best done at a local scale with input from experts who know the area and specific management requirements.

The Feral Cat Taskforce may be a forum for states and territories to discuss and collaborate on principles for managing local domestic cat issues. Should there be a request the Australian Government will facilitate these discussions.