Managing unwanted cats and dogs

Discussion paper

July 2007
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Invitation to comment

The Queensland Government is seeking community input on the issue of managing unwanted cats and dogs. This discussion paper has been prepared by relevant agencies within the Queensland Government as the first part of the process. It aims to stimulate discussion and feedback on the key issues that need to be addressed and identify possible solutions.

Interested stakeholders and community members are invited to make submissions in response to this discussion paper using the response form on page 15.

Submissions may be aligned to the specific questions raised in this discussion paper, or may address any matter that the state government should take into account when developing a policy position with regard to managing unwanted cats and dogs.

This document and related material is available on the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (DPI&F) website at www.dpi.qld.gov.au/animalwelfare

Hardcopy submissions should be sent by post or fax to the:

General Manager
Animal Welfare
Biosecurity Queensland
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GPO Box 46
Brisbane Qld 4001

Fax: (07) 3239 3510

The closing date for submissions is Friday 3 August 2007 (by close of business).

Further information

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The context

Companion animals are a highly valued and important part of our lives. Figures suggest that the majority of Australian households have pets—3.1 million households have a dog and 2.5 million households have a cat.\(^1\) Companion animals are credited with improving our health and contributing to our way of life. The reported beneficial effects include reduced stress, improved mental health and wellbeing, and improved health in the elderly.\(^2\)

Despite the value that cats and dogs have in our lives, there appears to be an increasing level of unwanted cats and dogs in Queensland, which is evident in the numbers of cats and dogs having to be euthanased each year (these are animals received by shelters and welfare organisations for which homes cannot be found). In 2006, the Animal Welfare League of Queensland euthanased 19% of dogs and 42% of cats received. Over the same period, the Queensland branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) euthanased 43% of dogs and 67% of cats received.

The number of cats and dogs being euthanased by welfare shelters and councils indicates that there is an increasing level of unwanted cats and dogs in the community. This could be addressed through more responsible animal ownership and better management of stray, unwanted and feral animals.

This discussion paper explores the issues associated with unwanted cats and dogs, and identifies possible solutions. There is no quick fix for this issue. It is also acknowledged that there are at least three or four distinct environments in Queensland that may require different solutions (i.e. cities, regional towns, rural/remote regions). The Queensland Government is working with key stakeholders to take the first step, and the purpose of this discussion paper is to collect feedback on what needs to be done and how it should be done.

Cats

Unwanted cats appears to be of greater concern than the issue of unwanted dogs. Between 2002 and 2006, the Queensland Animal Welfare League euthanased 9463 cats, or 43% of those received (21 871 received). Over the same period, the Queensland branch of the RSPCA euthanased 44 173 of the 65 583 cats received (67.35%).

There are three sub-populations of cats—owned, semi-owned (stray) and feral. The relative contribution of each of these sub-populations to unwanted cats is not clearly understood, as cats are not generally registered or identified in Queensland and research in this area is limited.

Cats can have their first litter as young as four months of age, with the average size of a litter being two to five kittens. Many owners don’t have their cats desexed before this age and therefore have unwanted litters. This problem is made worse because the female cat comes into heat again a few days after having kittens, which results in

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further litters. There is also some evidence to suggest that due to Queensland’s warmer climate, the cat breeding season is longer, meaning a larger number of kittens are born year-round in many areas.

Unwanted cats is of community concern, not only because of the numbers euthanased each year, but also because the presence of cats that are not desexed can lead to nuisance behaviour in the community, such as howling, marking of territory with urine and fighting. Uncontrolled cats can also have a significant impact on the environment by killing wildlife.

Dogs

The situation with dogs is quite different to that of cats. Only 20% of surrendered or stray dogs are euthanased according to Queensland Animal Welfare League figures (43% with the RSPCA, with most strays being reclaimed by their owners). There are, however, some particular breeds of dogs which are euthanased more than others—homes for crossbred working/terrier type dogs are the most difficult to find.

How concerned are you about unwanted cats and dogs in your area?
What (if any) systems are in place in your area for managing unwanted cats and dogs?
How effective do you think these systems have been?

Queensland’s approach to managing unwanted cats and dogs

Legislation

Local government laws

Animal control matters are managed by local governments through local laws. These local laws can include requirements for animal registration, identification or desexing. It is not compulsory for local governments to put a local law in place.

Of the 157 Queensland local councils, 124 have a dog registration system in place, with 11 of these also requiring cat registration. All 124 councils require identification of registered animals. Using microchips, as one means of animal identification, is only compulsory for declared dangerous dogs or where a permit is required to keep a certain number of cats or dogs.

Desexing is required for declared dangerous dogs or where a permit is required, because of the number of dogs or cats kept or the size of the premises on which they are kept. Some local governments provide registration fee incentives for desexed animals, where registration is required.

Some local governments have taken steps to reduce the levels of unwanted cats and dogs. For example, the Toowoomba City Council introduced compulsory cat registration in 2001 and offers a registration discount to owners of desexed cats and dogs. Identification is mandatory and can be done through a microchip or a tag on a
collar. Toowoomba City Council also offers financial incentives to have animals desexed through desexing vouchers, and regularly operates a microchip clinic providing a subsidised rate for inserting microchips into companion animals.

There is some flexibility in the way that animal control matters can be managed by local governments. For example, the Local Government Act 1993 regulates certain breeds of dog that are considered dangerous, such as pit bull terriers. These breeds of dogs are prohibited from being imported into Australia under the Commonwealth’s Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulation 1956. Queensland’s restricted–dog breed laws are therefore aligned with the Commonwealth’s requirements and apply throughout the state. Councils are obliged to enforce these laws. Under this legislation, local councils require the desexing of these restricted dog breeds.

**Animal Care and Protection Act 2001**

The Animal Care and Protection Act 2001 is administered by DPI&F and deals with welfare matters associated with all animals, such as duty of care and cruelty. RSPCA inspectors, in conjunction with DPI&F officers, enforce this legislation. This Act and model codes of practice for the welfare of animals consider euthanasia as an appropriate option for resolving animal welfare or animal management issues.

**Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Regulation 2003**

The Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Regulation 2003 classifies feral cats and wild dogs as Class 2 declared pest animals. The feral cat is defined as a cat that is not kept and fed by someone. The term wild dog refers collectively to purebred dingoes, dingo hybrids and domestic dogs that have escaped or been deliberately released.

As Class 2 pest animals, local governments and state land managers are required to consider feral cats and wild dogs as an element in their pest management plans. The objective of the plan should include levels of control to maintain the pest population below levels at which they cause significant damage.

**Other initiatives**

The Queensland Government has adopted a number of educational initiatives to support the legislative approaches to companion animal management. For instance, DPI&F has developed the ‘Help an animal smile’ campaign and also develops information packages regarding feral animal management.

The Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation develops model local laws for voluntary adoption by local governments. Model Law No. 4 (Keeping and Control of Animals) 2000 currently includes requirements for registration of animals and identification requirements for registered animals, including the use of microchips.

Animal welfare groups, such as the RSPCA and Animal Welfare League, play a pivotal role in animal management and welfare. They develop comprehensive educational programs, support animal management outcomes by accepting and caring for surrendered and stray animals, and provide animal adoption services. For example, the RSPCA has an Education Mobile Unit which provides a mobile
classroom to deliver education on animal care, and the Animal Welfare League has
an education team that visits schools.

The Australian Veterinary Association also runs a Pets and People Education
Program, designed to educate children about responsibilities and issues associated
with pet ownership and interacting with animals.

What is the issue?

While there are many strategies in place to address the issue of unwanted cats and
dogs, and to encourage responsible pet ownership in Queensland, it appears further
action is required.

Firstly, there is a disparate approach to animal control by local councils. For example,
most councils require dogs to be registered but only some councils register cats.
Additionally, some councils limit the number of animals that can be kept or require a
permit to keep more than the limit.

Secondly, the educational material regarding companion animals is different for all
parties, with some inconsistent messages being distributed according to the policy of
the relevant organisation.

Finally, there is a lack of research into the most effective means of managing
unwanted cats and dogs.

Overall, there appears to be a lack of a coordinated and targeted approach to
managing unwanted cats and dogs. We need to look at ways of improving our
approach to achieve a real reduction in the number of cats and dogs being
euthanased each year.

What is happening in other jurisdictions?

A number of states and territories have implemented measures in an effort to
address companion animal management issues. The focus is primarily on
registration and identification, with some jurisdictions also requiring some degree of
desexing. Generally, there is greater attention given to dog management than cat
management.

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3 Such as Toowoomba, Gladstone and Banana.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Scope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td><em>Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994</em></td>
<td>All cats and dogs over three months of age must be registered. They must be identified with a tag when outside their owner’s premises. Councils have also been given the power to require compulsory microchips for all cats and dogs in their municipality. Cats and dogs sold or given away from any pet shop, breeder or pound must have a microchip and be desexed. Councils have the power to require compulsory desexing of cats and dogs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td><em>Companion Animals Act 1998</em></td>
<td>Cat and dog owners must microchip their animals and register them with their council. A reduced fee for registration is offered for desexed animals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital</td>
<td><em>Domestic Animals Act 2000</em></td>
<td>It is compulsory to register dogs over eight weeks of age but not compulsory for cats. All cat owners must identify their animals either by microchip, collar and tag, tattoo or a combination of all three. The minimum requirement for a dog is to display the dog registration tag. Microchips may be used to provide additional identification details. It is compulsory to desex cats and dogs unless a permit is obtained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td><em>Dog and Cat Management Act 1995</em></td>
<td>The Dog and Cat Management Board of South Australia (established under the Act) is the only statutory authority of its kind in Australia. The Act provides powers and functions for councils to manage dogs and cats. All dogs and cats sold from a pound or refuge must be desexed and registered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td><em>Dog Control Act 2000</em></td>
<td>The Act provides for the control and management of dogs and requires all dogs over the age of six months to be registered with the local council. Neither microchips nor desexing are compulsory. Tasmania does not have cat registration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No territory-wide animal management legislation in place. Some councils, with local laws in place, register dogs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td><em>Dog Act 1976</em></td>
<td>All dogs over the age of three months must be registered with the local council. Desexing of dogs is not compulsory. There is no control of cats.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The four management tools

There are four key tools that could be used to address the issue of unwanted cats and dogs in Queensland:

- education
- registration
- identification
- desexing.

Education

Most people want to do the right thing by their animals and the community. However, sometimes pet owners are not aware of their options, or have conflicting views about the possible options. For example, some believe that it is better for the cat if they let it have kittens, although there is no scientific evidence that this is true.

Many organisations have very good information available; however, its availability may not be widespread or getting to the right people. Some information may even be conflicting. Therefore, there is the potential for consistent educational material to be developed regarding pet ownership, including benefits of registration, identification and desexing.

It is worthwhile and less costly to have all parties—including government, local councils, veterinary associations and animal welfare groups—agree on the information to be distributed, and for the community to have access to that information through all parties.

Successful implementation of any unwanted cat or dog management initiative will be highly dependant on the supporting educational material. The community needs to have better access to information about their rights and responsibilities in terms of animal management.

What (if any) educational initiatives are used in your area to promote responsible animal ownership?

How effective have these initiatives been?

Registration

Registration of animals provides a link between an animal and its owner by recording the owner of the animal, in much the same way as car registration systems record the owners of vehicles. Registration allows the authorities to reunite lost and stray animals with their owners, and to enforce any restrictions or obligations on owners. Registration fees in some areas may be used to help meet part of the costs of providing these services to the community.

Registration is essential in any program to control companion animals, as it enables animals to be reclaimed by their owner and authorities can make an informed decision about whether an animal should be euthanased. Many animals are
euthanased because the relevant authority has no capacity to identify and contact an owner.

In Queensland, it is optional for councils to have dog or cat registration. Many local councils have adopted dog registration; however, only a few councils (such as Toowoomba) have a cat registration system.

In order to optimise the effectiveness of a registration system, there needs to be information sharing between authorities. At the moment, dog registration information is not shared. This means that dogs can be moved from one council area to another with no record of the dog’s history. It may therefore be beneficial to have a reciprocal registration scheme or a statewide registration database.

What (if any) dog or cat registration services are available in your area?

How effective have these services been?

How supportive are you of a statewide animal registration system for cats and dogs?

Identification

Identification of an animal goes hand in hand with its registration. This ensures that the animal can be identified and returned to the owner as soon as it is found, thereby protecting the animal from being euthanased. Identification also enables authorities to distinguish between owned and unowned animals, and deal with stray animal nuisance issues.

The two forms of identification most used are collar tags and microchips.

Collar tags are visible from a distance, making it easy to determine that the animal is owned. However they can be lost, become unreadable and can be moved from one animal to another.

Microchips (small capsules) are implanted under the skin of the animal. The microchip has a unique number which can be read by a special electronic reader. Microchips normally last the lifetime of the animal and cannot be easily transferred between animals. Close proximity to the animal is needed to read the microchip.

Microchip implantation is generally performed by a veterinarian or an authorised organisation. It is a safe and almost painless procedure. The great majority of veterinary surgeons, councils and animal rescue organisations have microchip readers. There are optional national databases for microchips, which help reunite lost animals with their owners.

Currently, all councils with mandatory registration require animals to be identified, usually by wearing registration tags. Microchips may be recognised by these councils but they are not compulsory.
What (if any) identification methods are available in your area?
How effective have these methods been?
How supportive are you of using microchips as a method of identification?

Desexing

One way of dealing with unwanted cats and dogs is to have animals desexed. This reduces the number of unwanted animals being born.

Desexing involves an operation under anaesthetic performed by a veterinary surgeon. Male animals are castrated and females have their ovaries and uterus removed. Currently the cost of desexing dogs is around $160 for a male dog, $230 for a female dog, $80 for a male cat and $140 for a female cat.

Although the cost of the surgery may seem high, it is much less than the cost of raising a litter of puppies or kittens. Many organisations have programs available through which desexing can be accessed at a reduced fee. Nevertheless, desexing of an animal should be considered to be a part of a pet’s general expenses, along with food, veterinary care and shelter.

Cats and dogs can be desexed from eight weeks of age, although some veterinarians believe that it benefits the animal to wait until it is older. The Animal Welfare League and RSPCA, however, advocate early age desexing and believe that there is no strong evidence that early age desexing poses significant risks to the animal.

There are additional benefits to desexing. Desexed animals are less likely to be aggressive, mark territory, be prone to wandering or to develop certain types of cancers. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that desexing will result in an animal being lazier, lose their personality, experience ongoing pain or suffer by not being able to have a litter.

There have, however, been concerns raised about the effectiveness of compulsory desexing in reducing the number of unwanted dogs and cats. There is currently no consistent research in Australia that can demonstrate the effectiveness of compulsory desexing; however, international research indicates that such approaches have not had a great impact on the number of animals, due to problems with enforcement. Compulsory desexing would generally target owned animals, as it would be difficult to apply such an approach to stray or feral animals. Therefore, some research may be required to assess the likely impact of this management tool.

Regardless of the option adopted for reducing the number of unwanted companion animals, it is considered that any desexing requirement needs to be linked with registration and identification. This ensures that desexing records can be kept with registration and identification information, therefore negating the need to determine whether an animal is desexed by visual inspection—which can be extremely difficult in female animals.

How supportive are you of compulsory animal desexing?
Implementation options

There are five options to achieve a reduction in the number of unwanted cats and dogs (using the management tools):

1. maintain the current system
2. enhance the current system through non-compulsory measures
3. statewide voluntary registration, identification and desexing with incentives
4. statewide mandatory registration and identification, and voluntary desexing with incentives
5. statewide mandatory registration, identification and desexing.

Maintain the current system

Under the current system, education is the central approach to companion animal management. DPI&F has a comprehensive educational program regarding animal welfare, and community groups also develop educational materials for use by the public.

Individual local councils also have the choice of whether they put in place an animal control system. Councils can impose mandatory registration, identification and desexing requirements to meet the local circumstances. The current system does not impose any obligation on them to do so.

Enhance the current system through non-compulsory measures

The four management tools could be applied in a non-compulsory way to impact on the number of unwanted animals.

The first tool, education, could be improved by packaging educational materials developed by the relevant government and community parties for dissemination across the state. The use of incentives for desexing animals could also be increased.

The current system may also be improved through the modification of model local laws for voluntary use by local councils. Model Local Law No.4 (Keeping and Control of Animals) is silent on the issue of desexing, but could be modified to specifically include desexing as an adjunct to animal registration. This would give local councils a guide as to what they can adopt, should they wish to do so.

How supportive are you of the current Queensland system of managing unwanted cats and dogs being maintained?

How supportive are you of enhancements to the current system through the modification of model local government laws?

How supportive are you of enhancements to the current system through a coordinated communication campaign?
Statewide voluntary registration, identification and desexing with incentives

While local authorities can adopt registration and identification systems, not all have done so. One approach could be to require all local authorities to have a registration and identification system in place for voluntary use by the community. Alternatively, a state-based system could be developed for this purpose.

Participation in the voluntary system could be encouraged through an incentive system, such as discount vouchers for use in the community or subsidised desexing in partnership with veterinarians.

This option would have no enforcement burden associated with it for authorities; however, it may only capture responsible animal owners.

How supportive are you of statewide voluntary registration, identification and desexing with incentives?
What (if any) incentives are available in your area?
How effective do you think these incentives are?
Are there any incentives that would encourage you to have your animal desexed?

Statewide mandatory registration and identification, and voluntary desexing with incentives

In addition to the possible voluntary or incentive-based solutions to the unwanted cats and dogs issue, there are mandatory options (incorporating the four management tools) to be considered.

A statewide system requiring mandatory registration and identification could be implemented, supported by an incentive-based voluntary desexing program. Incentives could include lower registration costs for desexed animals or vouchers for desexing to be done through veterinarians. Since adopting a system of mandatory registration, Toowoomba City Council has seen an increase in the number of cats being returned to their owners, from 1% to 25%.

The system could be mandated by state legislation and build on the existing local council systems for animal registration. This would see local authorities enforcing the state legislation at the community level. Alternatively, a state government system of registration that is enforced by the state could be developed.

Any mandatory approach would be complemented by consistent educational initiatives across the state. Under this option, the educational initiatives would also promote the benefits of voluntary desexing.

The implementation of any mandatory system would, however, need to take animal welfare issues into consideration. A mandatory system places a burden on the community to comply, including a financial burden in this case. This may give rise to animal cruelty or abandonment, if owners are unwilling to meet these conditions.
How supportive are you of statewide mandatory registration and identification, and voluntary desexing with incentives?

Statewide mandatory registration, identification and desexing

The next step in a mandatory system would be to mandate desexing of animals along with registration and identification. Such a system could be further supported through reduced fees for registration of desexed animals.

Mandatory desexing could apply to all animals, reducing the number of animals that are able to breed and therefore leading to reduced population levels.

One variation on this mandatory desexing proposal is to only require animals to be desexed when they are sold or given away. That is, the requirement would not apply to animals that are already owned. The immediate impact of this may not be readily apparent; however, it should have an impact on the animal population in the long term.

A compulsory approach to desexing would, however, need to take into account legitimate exemptions. Breeding of animals, whether purebred or crossbred, is necessary to maintain the supply of pets and to support the valuable contribution they make to our community, and to ensure that genetic diversity is maintained in the population.

Allowance for animals that are recognised under accredited organisations for showing may also need to be considered. Furthermore, consideration may need to be given to exemption for working animals, such as farm dogs.

The likely effectiveness of a mandatory desexing program needs to be investigated further. There is a lack of agreement and research on the extent to which unowned and feral cats contribute to the number of cats being handed in to animal refuges and being euthanased. If unowned cats contribute significantly to the overall numbers of unwanted cats, the desexing of owned cats may have limited overall impact.

The Australian Capital Territory has introduced a form of compulsory desexing but this has not been shown to reduce the cat population, although any impacts may take years to show. There is currently no consistent research in Australia that can demonstrate the effectiveness of compulsory desexing. However, international research (particularly in the United States) indicates that mandatory desexing of cats is not effective due to ongoing issues with enforcement and other legal mechanisms. It is possible, however, that linking desexing with education, registration and identification in a coordinated manner will have a real impact.

Any mandatory system needs to be enforced in order to be effective. It also needs to be supported with a comprehensive educational program. All of these requirements are resource intensive.
How supportive are you of statewide mandatory registration, identification and desexing to address the unwanted cat and dog issue?
Can you suggest other potential solutions to the unwanted cat and dog issue?
Which system of animal control would you prefer in Queensland?

Ensuring the system is working

Any program aimed at dealing with managing unwanted cats and dogs needs to be monitored to ensure it is working. It is proposed that a Queensland Companion Animal Management Group, including members from key stakeholder organisations, oversee the implementation of any response to the problem and suggest refinements where necessary.

Ongoing research will also be needed to support any program implemented. To gain a fuller understanding of the issues involved for Queensland, research could be undertaken by a recognised centre of animal research. This research would inform policy development and the likely effectiveness of possible control methods.