



Inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW

Australian Veterinary Association Response to
Hearing Questions on Notice

May 2025

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The AVA is the peak professional body representing veterinary professionals and students across Australia. For more than 100 years we have been the united voice of the veterinary profession.

Veterinarians are among Australia's most trusted and respected professionals, dedicated to safeguarding animal health and welfare and supporting the communities they live in.

Our vision and purpose:

- **Vision** - A thriving veterinary profession
- **Purpose** - Building a vibrant future for veterinary professionals.

At the AVA we champion the veterinary community, advance professional excellence, foster connectivity, and deliver exceptional member experiences to achieve our vision of a thriving profession.

AVA Responses to Hearing Questions on Notice (QoN)

The AVA provides the following responses to the four questions taken on notice during the hearing held on 1 April 2025.

QoN One: Expand on the need for further field studies to understand the impact of cats on wildlife.

The AVA supports further research to improve our understanding of the ecological impacts of cats—owned, semi-owned, and unowned—across different environments. While existing studies (such as Legge et al. 2020 and the associated 2024 *BioScience* review by Doherty et al.) provide strong evidence that cats pose a significant threat to native wildlife, particularly small mammals, birds, reptiles, and insects, these studies also acknowledge limitations in available data. Specifically, Australian research to date has varied in methodology, duration, and sample size and has not systematically sampled all habitat types across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings.

The AVA agrees that cat predation is a serious concern, but we caution against overgeneralisation based on limited data. For instance, GPS and camera collar studies have shown that the prey taken by pet cats is often insects or reptiles rather than species of high conservation concern. A more comprehensive and standardised research approach—one that includes the impact of dogs and other predation pressures—is needed to inform evidence-based policy.

Additionally, while feral and unowned cats are more likely to have significant ecological impacts due to their high numbers and lack of containment, owned and semi-owned cats also contribute to cumulative biodiversity loss. More detailed studies across diverse regions and diverse cat populations would assist in identifying priority areas and designing tailored, effective cat management strategies.

QoN Two: Should cat containment be considered in the design of social and affordable housing.

The AVA supports the integration of cat containment considerations into the design of social and affordable housing. Access to safe containment infrastructure—such as enclosed balconies, outdoor cat enclosures, or purpose-built indoor living spaces—can help overcome the barriers faced by tenants in non-owned or low-income housing, where they often lack the autonomy or resources to modify premises. Enabling containment in these settings would assist in promoting responsible pet ownership without unfairly penalising people based on their housing status.

The AVA promotes a "One Welfare" approach, recognising the interconnectedness of animal welfare, human wellbeing, and environmental outcomes. People who care for semi-owned or unowned cats often do so from compassion, and many would be willing to engage in responsible ownership if given support. Housing design that facilitates containment would empower these individuals and align with welfare and environmental objectives.



QoN Three: Research regarding the extent to which cats have contributed to Australian wildlife extinctions. Can the AVA provide further detail or sources for that research?

The AVA acknowledges that domestic, stray, and feral cats have had a significant impact on Australian biodiversity and are widely recognised as a contributing factor in multiple native species extinctions. Estimates that cats have contributed to approximately 47 extinctions—around half of all mammalian extinctions in Australia—are cited in authoritative sources such as *Cats in Australia: Companion and Killer* (Legge et al., 2020) and more recent literature including Doherty et al. (2024) and Wallach and Lundgren (2025).

While this broad consensus underscores the risk posed by cats, particularly feral cats, the AVA reiterates its position—outlined in our submission—that much of the evidence underpinning these extinction attributions is based on expert opinion and habitat overlap rather than direct observation or longitudinal studies.

For example, the 2025 systematic review by Wallach and Lundgren in *BioScience* assessed the available data and found that:

*Over half of Australia's threatened and extinct endemic mammal species have been attributed to introduced red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) and cats (*Felis silvestris catus*). But this claim has so far been based on expert opinion. We conducted a timeline analysis, systematic review, and meta-analysis to assess whether the attribution of decline and extinction to these predators is based on evidence. Records for 43.6% and 19.6% of populations did not confirm that extinctions occurred after fox and cat arrival, respectively. Most threatened species have been attributed to these predators without supportive population studies with data (76.1% of species attributed to foxes, and 79.7% to cats). The meta-analysis showed a negative correlation between threatened mammal and fox abundance for spatial but not for temporal correlations, and we found no evidence for a correlation with cats. We conclude that the hypothesis that foxes and cats cause extinctions has come to be accepted with little evidence.*

Furthermore, while the impacts of feral cats are well documented, the role of pet cats and semi-owned cats in biodiversity loss remains less clear and under-researched.

The Doherty et al. (2024) review highlights these limitations. The authors themselves acknowledge the need for more standardised, long-term studies across urban and peri-urban environments to fully understand the relative contribution of different cat populations. As stated in our submission (p.6), the available evidence is “highly suggestive,” but in many instances, direct causal links between cat predation and population-level declines—particularly from pet cats—are based on limited or patchy data.

The AVA therefore urges a cautious interpretation of the evidence base. While we do not dispute that cats—especially unmanaged feral and semi-owned populations—pose a serious threat to Australian wildlife, the complexity of attributing extinction events to a single factor demands a more nuanced, evidence-driven approach. As noted by Wallach and Lundgren (2025), attributing species declines or extinctions to cats without robust supporting data risks oversimplifying ecological dynamics and may misguide conservation management decisions.

In summary, the AVA supports continued efforts to manage the impacts of cats on biodiversity, particularly through targeted feral cat control programs. However, we stress the need for additional high-quality, long-term ecological research to better quantify the relative impacts of different cat populations (feral, stray, pet) on wildlife, and to ensure that policy and intervention efforts are proportionate and scientifically sound. Furthermore, any intervention must be accompanied by an evaluation to ensure its effectiveness is measured and understood.



Key references:

- Legge, S. et al. (2020). *Cats in Australia: Companion and Killer*. CSIRO Publishing.
- Doherty, T. S. et al. (2024). “Predation by pet cats as a threat to biodiversity.” *BioScience*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biaf046>
- Wallach, A. D. & Lundgren, E. J. (2025). “Review of evidence that foxes and cats cause extinctions of Australia’s endemic mammals.” *BioScience*. [https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biaf046:contentReference\[oaicite:2\]{index=2}](https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biaf046:contentReference[oaicite:2]{index=2})

QoN Four: Has the AVA or any veterinary professional body explored the possibility of establishing a strategic specialist service to perform euthanasia of unowned cats, to relieve general practice veterinarians of that burden.

The AVA acknowledges the significant emotional and professional burden that euthanising cats can place on veterinarians, particularly when this work is under-resourced or unsupported. It is important to note that euthanasia via injection remains a veterinary procedure and must be performed by a registered veterinarian.

The AVA has not formally surveyed members about establishing a specialised euthanasia service or sub-sector. However, the concept warrants further exploration—especially if government-supported and designed to reduce moral distress and occupational stress for veterinarians. A model akin to specialist wildlife hospitals or shelter medicine teams, supported by appropriate funding, governance, and workforce planning, could offer a pathway for those veterinarians willing to take on such roles.

As explained in our submission page 11, mass killing of cats (i.e. trap and kill programs) is unlikely to be effective and can be counterproductive especially where a number of cats remain (Lazenby et al 2015) as well as being extremely expensive. Social acceptance of these programs is also unlikely (Paterson, 2014; Walker et al. 2017). Some modelling has shown that very high proportions of cats would need to be removed to eliminate cat populations ranging from 50-80% over many years (McCarthy et al 2016). With trap and kill programs there is also the risk of unconfined owned cats and semi-owned cats being affected (Robertson, 2007).

It is important to emphasise that euthanasia should not be the default or primary tool for cat population control. The AVA advocates for evidence-based, humane population management strategies—including targeted desexing, community engagement, and containment—supported by broader systemic reform, including better housing policy, public education, and regulatory clarity.

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