



Sustainability And Biosecurity
Invasive Species Policy Statement

**Feral cat declared pest - minimise risk to
domestic cats**

Related Legislation: *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007* (BAM Act),
Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Regulations 2013 (Regulations).

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Objective

To minimise the potential risk to domestic cats associated with the declaration of feral cats as declared pests in Western Australia (WA) under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007* (BAM Act).

Scope

This policy applies to the management of feral cats (*Felis catus* feral) as declared pests under the BAM Act and the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Regulations 2013*. It provides strategies and direction to minimise potential risks of harm to domestic cats from the declaration of feral cats as declared pests. The policy applies to all persons engaged in control activities for feral cats.

1. Introduction

The listing of feral cats as declared pests in WA supports the listing, under section 188 of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, of predation by feral cats as a key threatening process. Feral cats have played a major role in the extinction of at least 27 mammal species, and at present, endanger 147 Australian mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs (Department of Environment 2015). Feral cats are recognised by the Environment and Invasives Committee (EIC) as an extreme threat category for Australia (the highest threat) (IPAC 2015).

In 2017 the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) sought assistance from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) to declare feral cats as a pest under the BAM Act.

The declaration of pest under section 22(2) of the BAM Act principally supports DBCA undertaking control activities on feral cats within DBCA reserves and high priority ecological assets for the protection of threatened native fauna. The declaration will provide for the effective and humane management of feral cats with the purpose of protecting and recovering native wildlife, and to reduce transmission of toxoplasmosis to humans, domestic stock and some native animals.

It also provides a mechanism for Government, Recognised Biosecurity Groups (RBGs), Natural Resource Management (NRM) groups, and community groups and land managers to raise funds to participate in conservation activities to control pest animals in order to minimise their impact on native species.

Feral cats and domestic cats are the same species, *Felis catus*, and despite a long association with humans (about 9000 years) the species retains a strong hunting instinct. This instinct allows cats to easily revert to a wild or feral state when abandoned or released into the wild.

The degree of association cats have with humans allows the grouping of cats into three main categories, which are recognised nationally in Australia; feral, stray and domestic.

These categories are not necessarily discrete, as animals may transition from domestic to stray if lost or abandoned, and from stray to feral. The reverse can also

occur if stray cats are re-socialised with treatment and care from people. Feral cats have probably experienced no socialisation with humans for several generations and, as adults, are unlikely to ever be sufficiently tamed to become fully domesticated.

Only feral cats are declared pests in WA.

Distinguishing cats by category

Appearance is not a reliable way to identify feral cats as there is little difference in appearance between a domestic or stray cat and a feral cat. Appearance and weight varies with individual animals.

A cat's dependence on humans, its location and behaviour, and the presence or absence of identification markers is used to distinguish domestic cats from feral cats.

Location and dependence

Feral cats live and reproduce in the wild and survive by hunting or scavenging. They are found all over WA inhabiting all types of habitats, including forests, woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and arid areas. They are not registered with a local authority or identified according to the [Cat Act 2011](#) (Cat Act). They live as wild animals independent of people, and their behaviour is different from domestic or stray cats. A feral cat is unlikely to ever display socialised behaviour or willingly be in the presence of humans.

Stray cats are found in and around towns, cities, and rural properties. These cats live in the wild because they have become lost or abandoned and now fend for themselves. Stray cats may depend on some resources provided by humans but they are not owned by a person or registered, although they may have been domestic pets at some stage of their life. They may be offspring of pet cats and never socialised with people. Abandoned or stray domestic cats and kittens have a difficult time surviving without some human intervention. Stray cats are sometimes deliberately fed by people who do not consider themselves as the owner of the cats.

Domestic cats are fully socialised and may be owned by an individual, household, a business or corporation. Most or all of their needs are supplied by their owners but they may sleep outdoors and wander. Domestic cats are subject to the Cat Act, which requires that they are registered with local authorities and identified according to the Cat Act.

In summary:

- A feral cat is not owned or socialised and none of their needs are satisfied by humans.
- Stray cats are not owned but may be semi-socialised. Some of their needs may be satisfied by humans indirectly, and in some circumstances deliberately.
- Domestic cats are fully socialised, owned and registered with a local authority and identified according to the Cat Act. Their needs are satisfied by humans.

Behaviour

Feral cats are predominantly solitary and nocturnal, spending most of the day in the safety of a shelter such as burrows of rabbit and ground-nesting birds, hollow logs or rock piles. They are carnivores, generally eating small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and insects, depending on their availability.

Stray cats live apart from people but often in proximity to human habitation or industry as these indirectly supply food for scavenging and shelter under houses and abandoned buildings and other structures. Hollow logs, ditches, thick undergrowth and wood or rock piles may also be used for shelter. Some stray cats live in the vicinity of garbage dumps as these provide food from scraps and live prey by attracting rodents and birds. Stray cats' interactions with people may be temporary and casual.

Domestic cats reside with their owners at their place of residence. They are dependent on their owners for care, food and shelter. There is no legislative requirement to keep a domestic cat confined to their owner's property, however it is generally accepted that responsible cat ownership involves keeping pets at home and to prevent them from straying off the property.

2. Strategy

Management of risk to domestic cats

Only feral cats are declared pests in WA and the following mechanisms support the minimisation of potential risks of harm to owned (domestic) cats from the declaration of feral cats as declared pests.

Legislative identification requirements for domestic cats

The Cat Act currently applies to pet cats to impose responsible cat ownership. Key points include:

- The legislation is generally enforced by local government.
- The Cat Act requires that cats over 6 months of age are registered with the local authority and wear its registration tag when the cat is in a public place (unless exempt for reasons given in the Act).
- The Cat Act requires the owner to ensure the cat is micro-chipped and sterilised by a veterinarian (unless exempt).
- Local governments may administer their own policies or local laws on cat ownership, enforce the legislation and its regulations.

The declaration of feral cats under the BAM Act does not affect requirements already in place under the Cat Act.

Responsibility of domestic cat owners

Cat owners need to adhere to the requirements of the Cat Act regarding registration and identification. Any curfews imposed by local government on cats should also be followed.

In addition it is advised that:

- Owners refer to the RSPCA Australia information booklet [Keeping your cat safe and happy at home](#) and keep domestic cats inside (particularly at night) or have an outside cat enclosure, especially if living in rural or remote areas.
- Domestic cats should not be permitted to roam in or near bushland areas and reserves such as National Parks.
- Cats are de-sexed, as they are less likely to roam off property, especially if de-sexed when young. De-sexing is essential to stop population growth in all categories of cats.
- Cats should be clearly identified as a domestic cat by wearing its registration tag on its collar.

Biodiversity Conservation Act

Cats and other domestic animals are prohibited on conservation reserves and cats should be prevented from straying onto private or public land, especially in rural or remote areas.

The DBCA is responsible for the control of pest animals on *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* (CALM Act) lands. Part 9 section 134(1) of the [Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016](#) Section 134 states that for Environmental pests on CALM Act land -

- (1) If CALM Act land is in an area for which a species is an environmental pest, the CEO must
 - a) eradicate the environmental pest on the CALM Act land if it is practicable to do so; or
 - b) take measures to otherwise control the environmental pest on the CALM Act land.

3. Welfare of feral cats

Feral cats are usually found in low densities over large home ranges and are cautious and suspicious, which makes effective management challenging. A number of techniques may need to be employed to effectively manage feral cats.

All management actions should be justifiable and undertaken within an overarching strategy that aims to effectively reduce feral cat numbers in a sustained manner. Effective and humane techniques should be used and implemented in a coordinated manner to minimise risk to domestic cats and other non-target species.

Under the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* (AW Act), control of feral cats must be undertaken in a manner that is generally accepted as usual and reasonable for killing that particular pest, and reasonable care must be taken to ensure other animals are not harmed. It is an offence under the AW Act to be cruel or cause unnecessary harm to an animal, including declared pests, and penalties of up to \$50 000 and imprisonment for five years apply to an offence.

Techniques that minimise suffering to the animal prior to, and during the activity are considered most humane, according to the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions –

[feral cat humaneness matrix](#). The RSPCA Australia Knowledgebase provides information on the subject of [humane killing](#).

Compliance with the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions endorsed [standard operating procedures for feral cats](#) is recommended (see 5. Guides and standard operating procedures).

Domestic cats that are managed in accordance with the Cat Act will be at minimal risk from any of the prescribed control methods.

4. Effective management of feral cats

Exclusion fencing

Exclusion fencing is used to protect areas of high conservation value and allow eradication of pest animals while preventing entry of new pests. Exclusion fencing can effectively create mainland islands that are free from feral cats.

Exclusion fencing is a high cost control method as it requires regular and sustained maintenance and surveillance to remain free of cats. It is only in these situations that eradication is likely to be achieved. Successful eradication of pests within the fenced area usually requires the use of more than one control method.

Fencing can have negative impacts on native species, particularly in regard to limiting their movement and dispersal.

This technique poses little risk to domestic cats as it excludes wandering cats from entering the area where control of feral cats is taking place.

Baiting

The WA State Government developed Eradicat[®] bait for feral cats and it is registered for specific use in fauna conservation and recovery programs in WA under the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority. The product is not made available to the public as a retail product or approved for use by the general public. It can only be used in WA by authorised officers, Licensed Pesticide Management Technicians or Approved Users, all operating under the [Code of Practice for the Safe Use and Management of 1080 in Western Australia](#), and DPIRD's [Safe use and management of 1080 Landholders manual](#). The control of feral cats using lethal baits is also subject to the *Medicines and Poisons Act 2014*.

Eradicat[®] uses 1080 which replicates a naturally-occurring toxin found in some WA plant species. Many WA native animals have developed a higher tolerance to this toxin so are less at risk from baiting programs that use the toxin. Eradicat[®] can only be used when authorised by the DBCA. All proposals for the use of Eradicat[®] in WA are assessed by the Feral Cat Technical Committee and the 1080 Risk Assessment and Approval Process (see above).

Poison baiting can pose a risk to non-target native fauna and domestic pets and the use of lethal baits is strictly controlled in WA by several authorities, as indicated here. Baiting programs can pose a risk to domestic cats that have access to the area being

baited however there have been no reported deaths of domestic cats from feral cat control programs using Eradicat® in WA.

The RSPCA advocates that any baiting programs using 1080 are carried out in accordance with the codes of practice and standard operating procedures available on the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions [PestSmart website](#). Summary information about animal welfare risks of 1080 can be found on the [RSPCA Knowledgebase](#).

Trapping

The use of cage or box traps is labour intensive and impractical for broadscale control of feral cats, however it can be effective in capturing individual feral cats. Non-target captures can generally be released unharmed.

The PestSmart standard operating procedure [using cage traps](#) should be referred to as a guide.

Cats captured in cage traps can be inspected for a collar, registration tag and scanned for a microchip to identify the owner. The presence of a microchip clearly identifies a trapped cat as owned and domestic. Whenever possible identified cats must be transported to a cat management facility so that cats can be reunited with their owner. It is recommended that portable scanners are available for use in the field during cage trapping operations.

Leghold traps must **not** be used by unauthorised people to control feral cats in WA. Leghold traps are considered inhumane devices under the AW Act section 19(2)(b), and penalties apply to an offence under section 19. Leghold traps for feral cat control in WA is restricted to research approved by the Animal Ethics Committee for use in precise locations of high conservation value.

Shooting

Shooting is labour intensive and not considered effective for broadscale control of feral cats. Shooting can be effective in removing individual problem feral cats and/or to reduce localised cat numbers in the short term, but it is an ineffective longer-term method for reducing populations.

This technique can pose a risk to domestic cats not wearing a collar visible to the operator. Domestic cats may be wearing a collar but this is not always the case and every effort should be made to ensure that domestic cats are identified as such and not shot. It is recommended that landholders and neighbours be notified before commencement of a feral cat shooting operation to reduce risk to domestic cats.

The following points should be followed when shooting is used to carry out feral cat control:

- All use of firearms must comply with relevant legislation and accompanying regulations, including, but not limited to, the *Firearms Act 1973*, the *Animal Welfare Act 2002*, *Biodiversity and Conservation Act 2016* and *Biodiversity and Conservation Regulations 2018*.

- Be conducted in a humane manner where a shot to the head is considered the most humane of the techniques used.
- When shooting is used to kill feral cats caught in cage traps it must be done as humanely and as quickly as possible, and in accordance to PestSmart standard operating procedure [Ground shooting of feral cats](#).
- Notify relevant landholders and neighbours before a feral cat control operation commences to reduce risk to domestic cats.
- Shooting is only to be carried out by licensed and qualified shooters, using the correct firearm, ammunition and shot placement within range.
- Shooting is done in accordance with the PestSmart standard operating procedure [Ground shooting of feral cats](#), and other relevant standard operating procedures.

5. Guides and standard operating procedures

This policy was informed by the following documents which can be used as a guide and instruction for best practice.

- Australian Veterinary Association 2016 [Management of Cats in Australia](#).
- Centre for Invasive Species Management Solutions endorse the following standard operating procedures for feral cats as guides only, as they do not replace or override WA legislation (including OH&S).
 - CATCOP [Model code of practice for the humane control of feral cats](#)
 - CAT001 [Ground Shooting of Feral Cats](#)
 - CAT002 [Trapping of feral cats using cage traps](#)
 - GEN001 [Methods of euthanasia](#)
- Code of Practice for the safe use and management of 1080 in Western Australia
- Management guidelines for the [Safe use and management of 1080](#) in Western Australia.
- Metsers EM, Seddon PJ, van Heezik YM. [Cat-exclusion zones in rural and urban-fringe landscapes](#): how large would they have to be? *Wildlife Research* 37(1) 47-56.
- [National Feral Cat Management Workshop Proceedings 2015](#).
- RSPCA 2017 discussion paper [Identifying Best Practice Cat Management in Australia](#).
- RSPCA 2018 [Summary of Findings and Recommendations](#), Identifying Best Practice Cat Management in Australia.
- [Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats](#) (2015) which sets out a national framework to guide and coordinate Australia's response to the impacts of feral cats on biodiversity.
- Threatened species recovery plans; [DBCA threatened species and communities](#).

6. Abbreviations

BAM Act	<i>Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007</i>
BAM Reg	<i>Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Regulations 2013</i>
CISS	Centre for Invasive Species Solutions
DBCA	Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions
DPIRD	Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
NRM	Natural Resource Management Group
RBG	Recognised Biosecurity Group