



# Report of the Environment Committee

## Petition of Erica Rowlands: Mandate the registration and desexing of pet cats and kittens

July 2023

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Hon Eugenie Sage  
Chairperson

## Petition of Erica Rowlands

### Recommendation

The Environment Committee has considered the petition of Erica Rowlands—Mandate the registration and desexing of pet cats and kittens. It recommends by majority to the government that legislation is developed to implement a nationwide cat management framework based on the principle that cats should be registered, desexed, and microchipped with appropriate exemptions.

### Request to mandate the registration and desexing of cats

The petition was presented to the House on 10 November 2021. It requests:

That the House of Representatives pass legislation requiring all domestic cats to be registered via microchip to their legal owners, and to be desexed unless kept contained by registered cat breeders.

The petitioner gives the following reason for the petition:

It is widely known that cats cause a problem for native species, and that rescue groups face relentless battle against the effects of irresponsible owners. We have committed as a nation to invest in the goal of being predator free by 2050, but with no improvement in sight for the management of pet cats, or the elimination of feral populations. Requiring cats to be registered and desexed will reduce their populations, enforce responsible cat ownership, and protect our wildlife.

The petitioner believes that the framework for managing cats needs to be improved to achieve the national goal of being predator free by 2050. The petitioner considers that domestic cats are both companions and predators. We received submissions from the petitioner and several organisations interested in the issue.

### Comments from the petitioner

The petitioner's submission is aimed at politicians, environmentalists, cat owners, and cat breeders. She considered the groups' possible concerns in her proposal for action.

The petitioner suggested that the rationale for control requirements should have a "pro-cat" and "support rescues" message. It should encourage support from both sides of the debate—"those who love cats and those who want them gone". She suggested that political support for this cause could change the culture of cat management, leading to cats being controlled, and a more controllable cat population by 2050.

We heard that talking about a "cat ban" is not helpful. The petitioner explained that perceived threats to people's pets will not reduce the cat population enough to protect native wildlife. She suggested that cat ownership should be more like owning a dog: owners should pay for them, register them, and be held legally responsible for them. She told us that this would reduce the number of cat owners, and cats in the streets, without creating conflict.

The petitioner pointed out that cat owners need to consider the mental and financial burden placed on animal rescue shelters by the regular and uncontrollable influx of unwanted cats and kittens. She suggested that enforcing desexing will reduce cat numbers in just one year. Areas that still have lots of stray cats then can be identified and targeted for support.

The petitioner commented on the amount of work that responsible cat breeders do to produce healthy kittens. In New Zealand, these breeders are “lumped in with backyard breeders”.<sup>1</sup> She suggested that, to solve this issue, there should be stringent criteria for breeder registration to create less competition amongst cat breeders. Responsible breeders could then charge higher prices for their cats. Breeders would then be able to invest in improving their cats’ bloodlines, genetic screening, and importation; this would improve the overall quality of cats. She suggested that breeders could be required to contain all cats on their property, and desex all kittens before they go to their new homes.

We were told that several local councils already have bylaws about microchipping and registration, so it is not a new concept. The petitioner believes that regulations do not need to be actively enforced to make a difference.

The petitioner concluded that cat control legislation would be a step towards creating a nationally consistent, well documented, and recognised set of requirements for cat owners and breeders. This would be part of building a better solution for New Zealand.

## **Views of cat management groups**

We received written and oral submissions from several organisations. Many of these were part of, or supportive of, the New Zealand Cat Management Strategy Group. The group promotes responsible cat ownership, balancing the views of cat owners and environmentalists. It collaborated with other organisations to produce a report in 2020 which contains recommendations for humanely managing cats to protect both cat welfare and the New Zealand environment.<sup>2</sup>

## **Responsible cat ownership**

Submitters emphasised the importance of responsible cat ownership. Responsible cat ownership involves:

- desexing cats before they can reproduce (as early as 4 months)
- microchipping cats
- registering cats
- regulating cat breeders
- providing happy and safe homes for cats.

Submitters pointed out that the public has little interest in keeping their cats at home without the ability to roam.

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<sup>1</sup> Backyard breeding is a colloquial term that refers to the irresponsible breeding of companion animals for sale.

<sup>2</sup> [New Zealand National Cat Management Strategy Group Report 2020.](#)

Submitters claimed that the reluctance to contain cats to a property causes cat overpopulation. Roaming cats also kill native wildlife, are a nuisance to others, and spread zoonotic diseases.<sup>3</sup> Submitters told us that the public is more aware of the risks posed by roaming cats because of online content that focuses on indoor or apartment cats, “catios”, and of cats being walked while constrained by harnesses and leashes.

### **Animal management has three categorisations for cats**

Submitters that agreed with the New Zealand Cat Management Strategy Group explained that a cat may be categorised as domestic (companion), stray, or feral. A domestic cat lives with humans, and is dependent on them for its welfare. A stray cat is lost or abandoned and lives as an individual or in a colony, usually in an urban area with many of its needs indirectly supplied by humans. A feral cat has none of its needs provided for by humans and generally lives outside centres of human habitation. The stray cat population increases because stray cats breed with roaming domestic cats.<sup>4</sup>

### **Predator Free 2050**

We heard that there is a “cat-shaped hole” in the vision to achieve New Zealand’s Predator Free 2050 goals, and submitters noted there is a lack of legislation for cat management. The Department of Conservation manages public conservation land and, on several islands, has completely eradicated feral cats. Some submitters suggested expanding the goals of Predator Free 2050 to specifically target cats’ predation on native wildlife.

### **Trapping and controlling stray and feral cats**

Submitters explained the different processes by which cats are controlled and trapped. They submitted that, in New Zealand, cat control by trapping aims to prevent harm to native wildlife.

“Trap, neuter, and return” is trapping a stray cat, neutering it, and then releasing it back into the stray cat colony. Some submitters think that this approach is irresponsible. They informed us that cat colonies will eventually die out when the cats are neutered, but that the cat colonies continue to pose a threat to native wildlife in the meantime.

Snip ‘n’ Chip is a programme run by the SPCA to desex and microchip cats. The programme uses charitable funding to eliminate the cost barrier that owners may face. Multiple submitters endorsed the programme, and it could be a transitional framework towards increasing the management of cats.

Submitters informed us that trappers have a policy of keeping cats for seven days, because not all domestic cats are microchipped. Submitters noted that a domestic cat is private property, which puts trappers in a challenging position. If a cat is feral, there are behavioural signs to watch for. However, there are no behavioural differences to distinguish a stray from a domestic cat. If a trapped cat is not claimed within seven days, it is transferred to a shelter.

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<sup>3</sup> Zoonotic diseases are caused by germs that spread between animals and people.

<sup>4</sup> [Code of Welfare: Companion Cats - MPI.](#)

## Organisational and public engagement initiatives

All of the submitters told us that animal rescue shelters are overwhelmed. The SPCA reported that three-quarters of all animals they receive at shelters are cats, with numbers reaching over 25,000 per year.

Submitters reported that unregulated cats have a negative impact on New Zealand society. Uncontained roaming cats annoy neighbourhoods. The number of unwanted litters of kittens increases each year because of warmer winters. Roaming cats are harmed by various dangers, such as vehicles, other animals, constant impregnation, and disease.

Submitters explained that cats prey on native wildlife, including lizards, wētā, bats, and native birds that fledge on the ground. Cats are the sole transmitter of toxoplasmosis which harms farm animals and marine life, including the endangered Māui and Hector's dolphins. Submitters consider that cat management laws could reverse these outcomes and have a positive impact on people and animals. Submitters informed us that desexing increases cats' lifespans.

Predator Free NZ informed us that it has conducted a survey into what the public believes is responsible cat ownership. Of the survey participants, 82 percent thought that desexing was required, and 62 percent believed microchipping was a requirement of responsible cat ownership. Wellington City Council conducted a survey of 3,000 people which showed that 89 percent of participants supported cat control. Multiple submitters told us that responsible cat ownership is not a publicly contentious issue anymore.

Companion Animals New Zealand (CANZ) is a registered charity which owns and operates a national microchip database for all companion animals, known as the New Zealand Companion Animals Register. CANZ considers that its database is comprehensive, accessible, highly functional, and secure and could be used to support legislation. The register has assisted with quick animal repatriation, especially after events such as the Christchurch earthquakes and Cyclone Gabrielle.

CANZ told us that there should not be multiple animal registers as this has caused confusion in Australia. CANZ believes that cats should be microchipped and registered on its register prior to cats being sold or given to a new owner.

## Current legislative arrangements

The Ministry for Primary Industries is the appointed observer of the New Zealand Cat Management Strategy Group and is responsible for the Animal Welfare Act 1999, which administers the *Code of Welfare: Companion Cats*.<sup>5</sup>

The ministry explained that the matters that can currently be investigated under the *Code of Welfare: Companion Cats* are the dumping of cats and kittens, inhumane trapping or euthanising of cats, and mistreatment or failure to provide for the needs of cats and kittens,

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<sup>5</sup> [Code of Welfare: Companion Cats - MPI](#).

including at breeding and retail facilities. Notably, the code recommends that companion cats be desexed, but the Act does not allow the desexing of cats to be made mandatory.

The ministry suggested that any legislation for cat control should be like the Dog Control Act 1996. The ministry has discussed the issue with officials from Tasmania in Australia, who have implemented mandatory microchipping and desexing of cats under the Cat Management Act 2009.

The Tasmanian officials reportedly emphasised that the success of the Tasmanian Act relies on resourcing and ongoing funding to enforce the provisions of the legislation over time. In Tasmania, the government provides partial funding, and requires that the cost of desexing or microchipping of found cats is recovered from the owner.

The ministry noted the importance of engaging with local government and the Department of Internal Affairs, as they would be the crucial players in administering the petitioners' suggested reforms.

The Department of Internal Affairs administers the Dog Control Act 1996. The department has no substantive issue with the petition. However, it noted that the Dog Control Act 1996 in its current form is not an appropriate vehicle for controlling cats. The Act addresses the behaviour of dogs, and dog-and-human interactions by focusing on registration and owner obligations, and is not designed to prevent animal attacks on native wildlife. The department informed us that the National Dog Register would also need significant redevelopment to include cat registration.

The department told us that the offences in the Dog Control Act 1996 are too limited in scope. It suggested that cat control is complex, as there are multiple Acts about the environment and owners' rights that would be relevant. The Dog Control Act has not been reviewed since it was enacted 20 years ago. The department believes that the Act meets its objectives and empowers councils appropriately to make regulations.

Taituarā, an organisation of local government professionals, informed us that having a legal definition of "unowned cat" could assist councils to make clear decisions on whether to euthanise trapped cats. On Stewart Island non-microchipped or non-desexed cats may be destroyed or euthanised because its regional pest management plans define domestic cats as a "pest agent".<sup>6</sup> Taituarā also told us that councils have successfully implemented bylaws to manage cats. It believes that some councils have been unsuccessful in implementing bylaws because the public does not have enough information about the benefits of cat control.

## **Submitters' suggestions for a legislative framework**

The petitioner suggested that cat management and control would be implemented best through a legislative framework. She told us that this framework should mandate that pet cats and kittens be desexed, registered, and microchipped. Many submitters suggested legislation like the Dog Control Act 1996. They consider that cat management is inconsistent nationally, as regional bylaws vary, and some regions have no bylaws addressing the issue.

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<sup>6</sup> Under the Biosecurity Act 1993.

Other submitters also requested additional restrictions. These included limiting the number of cats per household (which has already been implemented by 20 councils), restricting the right to establish and maintain cat colonies, and limiting the roaming of owned cats' to reduce predation on native biodiversity.

Taituarā wants a nationally led scheme and considers that education would be pivotal to the scheme's success. For regulation to work, the public would need to support its aims, and it would need to be affordable. Taituarā considers that such a scheme would need to be funded by the central government because its costs would be substantial. They hope that registration fees in subsequent years would cover some or all of the scheme's costs.

The Veterinarians Association for Animal Welfare Aotearoa proposed that the regime be self-funding. It supported the overall goal of cat control legislation but said that the petitioner's framework does not go far enough. It explained that regulating domestic cats only will not be enough to achieve the goals of Predator Free 2050. The association told us that the overall cat population would still increase under the petitioner's proposed framework because the categories of cat are interlinked.

## **Our response to the petition**

We commend the petitioner and the other interested organisations that made submissions for their work and advocacy to improve the management of cats in New Zealand. We appreciate the companionship that pet cats provide to people. But we accept the evidence presented by submitters that the current, largely unregulated approach to cats does not serve the welfare of the large numbers of stray and feral cats. Moreover the stray and feral cat population decimates native wildlife.

We agree with submitters it is time to legislate a nationwide cat management framework based on the notion cats should be registered, desexed, and microchipped with appropriate exemptions. Such a framework already exists for dogs and we believe it is time to apply the same approach for cats. We consider that a nationally consistent approach to cat control would provide a more effective outcome than bylaws. Public education and gaining community support for change will need to go hand in hand with legislative and regulatory action but we note the significant and positive change in public attitudes to dog ownership since the enactment of the Dog Control Act in 1996. The ACT Party does not believe that a national cat management framework is required.

## **Appendix**

### **Committee procedure**

The petition was presented to the House on 10 November 2021. The Petitions Committee referred the petition to us in June 2022. We met between 23 June 2022 and 27 July 2023 to consider it.

We considered written submissions from the petitioner, Companion Animals New Zealand, the Department of Conservation, the Department of Internal Affairs, the Ministry for Primary Industries, Predator Free New Zealand Trust, Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand, SPCA, Taituarā Local Government Professionals Aotearoa, and Veterinarians for Animal Welfare.

We heard oral submissions from the petitioner, Predator Free New Zealand Trust, the Department of Conservation, SPCA, Forest and Bird, Ministry for Primary Industries, Veterinarians for Animal Welfare, the Department of Internal Affairs, Taituarā Local Government Professionals Aotearoa, and Companion Animals New Zealand.

### **Committee members**

Hon Eugenie Sage (Chairperson)

Tāmami Coffey

Simon Court

Barbara Kuriger

Hon Stuart Nash

Hon Scott Simpson

Lemauga Lydia Sosene

Hon Phil Twyford

Angie Warren-Clark

### **Evidence received**

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on the [Parliament website](#).

### **Recordings of our hearings**

Recordings of our hearings of evidence can be accessed online:

- [25 August 2022](#)
- [1 September 2022](#)
- [27 October 2022](#)
- [11 May 2023](#)