



**Submission by the
Royal New Zealand Society for the
Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Inc.**

On

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

06 May 2022



Executive Summary

- SPCA supports this petition. Cats are beloved companion animals in New Zealand. Many cat owners appreciate the benefits of responsible cat ownership such as desexing and microchipping their cats and to a lesser extent keeping their cats at home.
- However, there are gaps in responsible cat ownership resulting in cat overpopulation that negatively impacts our urban, rural, and wild communities. There are approximately 1.2 million companion cats in 41% of households across New Zealand, but only:
 - 88% of owners desex their cats (a downward trend from previous reports),
 - 49% microchip their cats; and
 - 11% keep their cats at home.
- Firstly, people with cats who roam enjoy the benefits of companionship, but do not pay the true cost for letting their cat roam, especially if they are not desexed or microchipped. Secondly, there is a failure of government to protect public goods of cat welfare, native wildlife, reducing transmission of toxoplasmosis to native marine mammals and pastoral animals, and controlling nuisance in communities.
- SPCA advocates for the New Zealand government to take a leadership role in supporting comprehensive cat management, including requirements for cats to be microchipped, with the microchipped registered, and to be desexed unless they are registered breeding animals.
- SPCA further supports legislation that enables local councils to pass bylaws to manage cats to protect of biodiversity, including the registration of cats on a government database.
- The National Cat Management Strategy Group (members include SPCA, the New Zealand Veterinary Association, Companion Animal Veterinarians, the Morgan Foundation, Local Government New Zealand, Companion Animals New Zealand, and observer members MPI and DOC) has extensively reviewed cat management in New Zealand. They recommend comprehensive cat management include that companion cats are desexed, microchipped and microchip registered, and kept at home.



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Introduction

The following submission is made on behalf of The Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (trading as SPCA).

SPCA is the preeminent animal welfare and advocacy organisation in New Zealand. The Society has been in existence for over 150 years with a supporter base representing many tens of thousands of New Zealanders across the nation.

The organisation includes 35 Animal Welfare Centres across New Zealand and approximately 60 inspectors appointed under the Animal Welfare Act 1999.

SPCA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Parliamentary Petitions Committee Mandating Desexing and Registration of Cats.

Submission

The need for mandatory desexing and registration of companion cats

Cats are beloved companion animals in New Zealand. Many cat owners appreciate the benefits of responsible cat ownership such as desexing and microchipping their cats and to a lesser extent keeping their cats at home. Appendix One contains a comprehensive table identifying all of the welfare benefits of desexing; microchipping and registering the microchip; keeping cats at home; and of cat management generally.

However, there are gaps in responsible cat ownership resulting in cat overpopulation that negatively impacts our urban, rural, and wild communities. Our SPCA Centres regularly see the welfare problems of overpopulation of cats, including:

- the predictable cycle of unwanted kittens each year because there are too many cats roaming that are not desexed;
- the numbers of cats and kittens that arrive who are lost or have strayed, but we cannot find their owner because they are not microchipped and registered; and



- the numbers of cats that come to our Centres who have contagious disease, are lost or have strayed, or injured because they roam freely from home.

Gaps in responsible cat ownership negatively impact other animals through predation on wildlife and spread of toxoplasmosis to farmed animals and vulnerable native marine mammals.

Gaps in responsible cat ownership also negatively impact people in communities, as free roaming cats cause nuisance by toileting in neighbourhood gardens which can spread toxoplasmosis to people, spraying and fighting with other cats, and harming valued wildlife.

The current approach to cat management in New Zealand does not work for cats or people

There is no overarching legislation for cat management in New Zealand, resulting in no consistent approach to desexing and microchipping. This has resulted in an ad hoc approach to cat management that leads to inconsistent outcomes for cat welfare, communities, and wildlife.

A lack of national legislation also hampers local council's ability to address cat-related issues in their districts. Local councils are increasingly under pressure to address cat-related problems; however, they are concerned with poor compliance and lack of ability to enforce bylaws. Recent examples of where local councils were reluctant to include cat management in the bylaw review include:

- Mackenzie District Council did not include desexing and microchipping cats in the 2021 review of their Keeping of Animals Bylaw, acknowledging that a lack of legislation for microchipping and registering cats limits their ability to mandate it through a bylaw.
- Selwyn District Council removed desexing and microchipping of cats in the 2020 review of their Keeping of Animals, Poultry, and Bees Bylaw, because it would be too difficult to enforce, and Council has no ability to issue fines or fund enforcement without national legislation.

Recommendations for achieving improved cat management in New Zealand

SPCA stands with diverse voices, such as the National Cat Management Strategy Group (NCMSG, 2020), in calling for improved cat management, including mandatory desexing and microchipping cats, as a more consistent, humane, and effective approach to address the impacts of cats in our shared



urban, rural, and wild spaces. We further support the inclusion of legislative provisions that manage a companion cat's ability to freely roam from their property. We recommend these key inclusions:

1. The purpose of national cat management should be to provide for the welfare of individual cats and reduce the impact of overpopulation through responsible cat ownership. Additionally, national management should provide for the protection of the welfare of other animals in New Zealand including wild and farmed species, and the reduction of cat-related nuisance in communities.
2. To clarify who is impacted by this legislation, it is essential to distinguish the three different types of cats in New Zealand. SPCA recommends the inclusion of the following definitions of cats:
 - **Companion cat** means a cat considered owned by a person, sociable, and directly dependent on humans.
 - **Stray cat** means an unowned or semi-owned cat, of varying sociability, interactions with, and dependence on humans. People may or may not manage these cats as individuals or in groups.
 - **Feral cat** means a cat that is unowned, unsocialised, and has no relationship with or dependence on humans.
3. We recommend that companion cat owners be required to desex their cats prior to sale or transfer of ownership unless the cat is a registered breeding animal. We recommend the age for desexing be prior to puberty which can happen as early as the age of four months. Provisions should be made that a cat be exempt from desexing where a veterinarian determines this requirement is detrimental to the health and welfare of the cat.
4. We recommend cat owners be required to microchip their cat and register the microchip prior to sale or transfer of ownership. We recommend microchipping and microchip registration be done as soon as possible as this ensures reunion with the cat owner if the cat becomes lost or strays. Provisions should be made that a cat be exempt from microchipping where a veterinarian determines this requirement is detrimental to the health and welfare of the cat.
5. We further recommend that cat management be comprehensive to achieve gains in protection of cat welfare, and benefits to communities and wildlife. We recommend that



provisions are made to enable local councils to pass bylaws related to protecting biodiversity as a standalone issue or as a nuisance. This would include requirements for cat owners to register their cats on a local database which would provide a record of companion cats and provide a revenue for funding enforcement of related bylaws. This is distinct from registering a microchip on a private database, such as the New Zealand Companion Animal Registry, which serves to reunite lost or stolen animals with their owner.

Background

Why we need national cat management

Cats are beloved companion animals in New Zealand and are valued by many people. We know that cats can have meaningful lives when they are part of a caring family that ensures they experience positive welfare and provides for their physical, health, and behavioural needs. Many New Zealand cat owners appreciate the benefits of responsible cat ownership such as desexing and microchipping their cats and to a lesser extent keeping their cats at home. (See Appendix 1 for a detailed overview of the welfare benefits of responsible cat ownership). However, there are gaps in responsible cat ownership in New Zealand. There are approximately 1.2 million companion cats in 41% of households across New Zealand (CANZ, 2020b), but only:

- 88% of owners desex their cats (CANZ, 2020b) which is a downward trend from previous reports (93.2%; Gates et al., 2019 and 93%; CANZ, 2016),
- 49% microchip their cats; and
- 11% keep their cats at home (CANZ, 2020b).

The most common reasons for not desexing cats are the cost and a general feeling it is not necessary (CANZ, 2020b, Gates et al., 2019). In addition to cats that have not been desexed, some may have already had a litter before being desexed, which further contributes to the unwanted cat population. The likelihood of undesexed companion cats contributing to the unwanted population of cats is exacerbated by most cat owners allowing their cats to roam freely.

The main barriers to microchipping include not feeling it is necessary and the cost, or that it is not legally required (CANZ, 2020b). Additionally, cat owners do not microchip their cats because they have



not made the time yet to do it, or did not realise cats could be microchipped, or keep their cats inside (CANZ, 2020b).

These gaps in responsible cat ownership resulting in cat overpopulation that negatively impacts our urban, rural, and wild communities. The National Cat Management Strategy Group has extensively reviewed the negative impacts of poor cat management including harms to the cat's welfare, harms to native New Zealand biodiversity, harms to pastoral animals, and to people. We briefly summarise these impacts below, and a more detailed review is available in the [National Cat Management Strategy Working Group Report](#).

Welfare problems for cats and overpopulation

Cats can face numerous welfare risks if not desexed, microchipped, or kept at home. Both male and female cats have a longer life span when desexed (Banfield Pet Hospital, 2013). Undesexed female cats are at risk of malignant mammary gland tumours (Dorn et al., 1968b; Hampe & Misdorp, 1974; Hayes et al., 1981; Graf et al., 2016). Microchipping facilitates reunions between lost cats and families. Keeping cats from roaming reduces the risk of injury and death from vehicles, fighting with cats and other animals, infectious disease transmission, and ingestion of harmful substances (Bruce et al., 2019; Loyd et al., 2013, Rochlitz, 2004a, b).

Problems from failure to desex, microchip, and keep cats at home also contribute to population level problems resulting in an increased number of cats living as strays, and seasonal influx of unwanted kittens that experience high mortality (Marston & Bennet, 2009; Nutter, 2004).

The abundance of lost, stray, or unwanted cats and kittens create a complex animal management problem that include ethical concerns about the euthanasia of thousands of healthy domestic cats and kittens every year, moral stress for the people involved, financial costs to organisations that manage these cats (NCMSG, 2020).

Predation on wildlife

Cats can negatively impact native bat and bird species, reptiles, invertebrates, and frogs (Farnworth et al., 2013; Fitzgerald et al., 1985; Fitzgerald, 1988; Gillies et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2010; Norbury et al., 2008; van Heezik et al., 2010). Companion cats with outdoor access pose a risk to wildlife but



their prey varies depending on their location (Farnworth et al., 2013; Gillies et al., 2003). Regardless of whether the species targeted is native or non-native and the effect on wildlife numbers, there can be negative welfare impacts on predated wildlife (Jessup, 2004). Much of the focus is on managing cats in areas with high ecological value, however, cat predation may represent a significant cause of mortality for some bird species in urban locations (Baker et al., 2005; Greenwell et al., 2019).

Spread of toxoplasmosis to vulnerable animals and people

Cats are the only definitive host of the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii* which causes toxoplasmosis in other animals and people (Stelzer et al., 2019). Pastoral species, such as sheep or deer, are primarily infected through feed and water contaminated with faeces from cats who have shed the protozoa eggs (Dubey, 2009; Stelzer et al., 2019). The welfare problems from toxoplasmosis result from infection and co-occurrence with other disease (Stelzer et al., 2019). In New Zealand, between 61% to 85% of sheep were positive for *T. gondii* (Dempster et al., 2011). Toxoplasmosis infection also poses economic impacts due to abortion in sheep (Dempster et al., 2011) and deer (Patel et al., 2019). In 2014, toxoplasmosis cost the sheep industry in the Hawke's Bay region of New Zealand approximately \$18 million (Walker, 2014).

Toxoplasmosis is a cause of death for New Zealand's native wildlife including the critically endangered Hector's and Maui dolphins (*Cephalorhynchus hectori*; Roe et al., 2013), New Zealand sea lions (Michael et al., 2016), and birds including kereru, North Island kiwi, and North Island kaka (Howe et al., 2014), paradise shelduck, and red-crowned kākāriki (Hunter & Alley, 2014).

Infection of humans occurs through two main pathways: ingestion of oocysts (that enter the environment from cat faeces) directly from the environment (for example, from garden soil, sand pits, and unwashed vegetables contaminated by cat faeces) or from tissue cysts in improperly cooked meat (Dubey, 2016).

Nuisance in communities

Free roaming cats can cause nuisance in communities by defecating and spraying in gardens, fighting with other cats, and creating noise. Occasionally cats cause nuisance by damaging property and the existence of unwanted stray cats on private property can also be a source of nuisance. Cat predation



on wildlife can cause community concern. Many community groups are engaged in protecting biodiversity but are limited in preventing predation by companion cats, especially in areas where cats live near sensitive wildlife areas. Companion animals with outdoor access such as guinea pigs, rabbits, aviary birds, and fowl can be negatively impacted by cats through disturbance or predation (e.g., Stewart, 2014; NZVA CAV personal communication December 9, 2019).

The current approach to cat management in New Zealand is inconsistent

A lack of national legislation for cat management in New Zealand poses challenges for ensuring that practices are consistently humane and effective. We have recently [reviewed](#) the landscape of cat management policies in New Zealand and determined that the multiple policy mechanisms used to manage cats for animal welfare, pest management, and nuisance have both positive and negative implications for cat welfare (Sumner, Walker, & Dale, 2022). In this review, we included context such as New Zealanders' acceptance of current or future laws and regulations and compared this with other countries, notably Australia, to identify potential directions and outcomes of increased regulation and a review of their effectiveness.

With no overarching legislation for cat management, there is no consistent approach to important issues such as desexing and microchipping, and local councils cannot address cat issues locally or are concerned with poor compliance and lack of ability to enforce bylaws.

Conclusion

SPCA supports this petition. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the Parliamentary Petitions Select Committee and would welcome further engagement on this issue. If any further information is required, the Society is happy to discuss this matter further. SPCA has conducted more in-depth analysis on policies related to desexing, microchipping and registering microchips, and keeping cats at home. We are happy to further discuss our recommendations for policies that promote effective and humane management of cats in New Zealand.



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Appendix 1: Benefits of cat management

Desexing, microchipping, and keeping cats at home are important tools to address problems with cat overpopulation (Farnworth et al., 2013; Joyce & Yates, 2011; Yates et al., 2013), and reduce the number of kittens that enter shelters and euthanased (New et al., 2000; Marston & Bennett, 2009; Marsh, 2010).

Welfare Benefits of Desexing

Desexing can also improve the welfare of cats directly as it can reduce risk of certain disease, reduce likelihood of roaming (which can increase risks of harms such as disease and infection, injury, and becoming lost), and increase lifespan. Desexing can also prevent the mortality of unwanted kittens which is often overlooked as a welfare impact.

Table 1: Welfare benefits of desexing cats

Decreased risk of reproductive disease	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16.3% of all tumours are mammary gland, making this the second most common tumour (Vascellari et al., 2009). 8.2% of tumours in a Swiss feline cancer registry (1965-2008) were mammary gland tumours (Graf et al., 2016). Previously reports showed 2.5% incidence of mammary gland tumours in female cats, 12% of all tumours making this the third most common tumour (Dorn et al., 1968b; Verstegen & Onclin, 2003). • More recently, mammary tumours have been found to make up 16.3% of tumours • >90% of mammary gland tumours in cats are malignant (Dorn et al., 1968b; Hampe & Misdorp, 1974; Hayes et al., 1981). A more recent study with a Swiss feline cancer registry found that 83% of mammary tumours were malignant (Graf et al., 2016). • Japanese and Siamese breeds are at increased risk of mammary tumours (Graf et al., 2016; Sorenmo, 2003; Verstegen & Onclin, 2003). • Pyometra risk increase significantly with age for female cats (Potter et al., 1991). 	
Benefits of desexing	Source
Sexually intact females are increased risk of mammary tumours.	Hayes et al., 1981
Sexually intact cats have 7 times the risk of developing mammary gland neoplasms when they get older compared to spayed female cats.	Dorn et al., 1968



Ovariectomy was found to protect against mammary carcinomas but not against benign mammary tumours. Intact cats 7 times overrepresented in population of cats diagnosed with mammary tumours.	Misdorp et al., 1991
Spay prior to one year of age is protective against mammary carcinoma: 91% risk of reduction if desexed before 6 months, 86% reduction if prior to one year. Spay done after two years increased the risk (likely due to very few cats spayed after this age).	Overley et al., 2005
Desexed female cats had significantly lower odds than entire female cats of developing tumour/malignant tumour in the mammary gland.	Graf et al., 2016
<p>Reviews on this topic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Root Kustritz, 2007; 2012 • Reichler, 2009 	

Increased lifespan and improved overall health

- Lifespan and quality of life should be considered an important factor for welfare. This point has been made for interpreting the benefits of desexing dogs, as desexing has been demonstrated to increase lifespan (Urfer & Kaeberlein, 2019).
- Lifespan should be cautiously interpreted, as it can be a proxy measure for overall better care provided for both owned and stray cats. There is very little research on this topic, so it is difficult to make strong claims about the specific impact of desexing on increasing lifespan.
- Improved health for both male and female cats in managed colonies may be related to decreased risk of infectious disease, nutritional deficiencies, and stress associated with reproduction (Gilhofer et al., 2019) and reduced reproduction related aggression in males (Cafazzo et al., 2019; Finkler et al., 2011; Gunther et al., 2018).

Benefit of desexing	Source
Desexed male cats live a mean of 62 percent longer than undesexed male cats, and desexed female cats live a mean of 39 percent longer than undesexed female cats.	Banfield Pet Hospital, 2013



Desexed stray cats were in better welfare condition compared to intact cats.	Gunther, et al., 2018
Undesexed males and females in a TNR managed colony were more likely to be injured or have impaired health.	Gilhofer et al., 2019

Decreased roaming risks

- Intact male cats are at higher risk of traffic accidents, injuries, bite wounds, and disease transmission compared to desexed males (Finkler et al., 2011; Gunther et al., 2015; 2018).
- Decreased roaming is most relevant for cat owners who do not keep their cats confined to their property (either garden or house).

Benefit of Desexing	Source
Roaming (and fighting and spraying) reduced or eliminated in 80-90% of cats.	Hart & Cooper, 1984
Desexing reduces activity related to territorial behaviour. Authors note cats are less active, which they do not specify includes roaming.	Cafazzo et al., 2019
Reviews on this topic:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bain, 2020. 	

Improved kitten welfare

- Unplanned kittens contribute to high numbers of animals surrendered to shelters. Kittens under the age of 6 months made up the largest proportion of owner-surrender cats to an animal shelter in Australia; 34% of all owner-surrendered animals were emaciated (Marston & Bennett, 2009).
- Kittens that enter the shelter system because they are from unplanned breeding can often be in a poor state of welfare. This is prior to shelter entry and not related to shelter stay.
- Free-roaming kittens had highest prevalence of emaciation and thinness, lowest BCS scores, higher prevalence of severe injury or disability than adults. (Gunther et al., 2018).
- There is high variability among kitten mortality in stray cats, however, at least one study showed 75% mortality before 6 months, with trauma being the most common cause of death (Nutter et al., 2004).

Benefit of desexing	Source
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28.3% of kittens that came into SPCA Centres were categorised as not healthy at intake. Not healthy categories include: Dead on Arrival; Unhealthy not treatable; Unhealthy treatable (urgent); Unhealthy treatable (non-urgent).	SPCA Intake Health Data: 1 Apr 2021- 9 December 2021
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Welfare benefits of microchipping & microchip registration

Microchipping and microchip registration can help ensure a lost or injured cat’s owner can be identified and contacted (Lord et al., 2009; Lancaster et al., 2015). This can be especially true during emergencies. In areas where cats are targets of pest control, microchipping and microchip registration or other forms of identification can help distinguish owned or managed stray cats from feral cats in pest management plans.

Table 2: Welfare benefits of Microchipping

Benefit of Microchipping	Source
During the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, 85% of owners of microchipped animals were contacted within 3 hours by the New Zealand Companion Animal Register, compared to only 25% of non-microchipped animals reunited with their owners within a 7-day period.	CANZ, 2020a
39% of microchipped cats were returned to their owners, compared to 2% returned for un-microchipped cats.	Lord et al., 2009
51% of microchipped cats were returned to their owners compared to only 5% of un-microchipped cats.	Lancaster et al., 2015

Welfare benefits of keeping cats at home

Cats who are allowed to roam from home face numerous welfare risks including threats to their health, consequences of becoming lost or straying, and if not desexed, can contribute to the unwanted kitten population in New Zealand.



Table 5: Decreased roaming

Benefit of keeping cats at home	Source
Reduces the risk of injury and death from vehicles, fighting with cats and other animals, infectious disease transmission, and ingestion of harmful substances.	Bruce et al., 2019; Loyd et al., 2013, Rochlitz, 2004a, b
Reduces risk of disease transmission to people and other animals (e.g., ringworm, FIV).	Hosie et al., 2009; Stull et al., 2015

Other Benefits of Cat Management

Desexing, microchipping, and keeping cats at home can also reduce the negative impacts cats can have including nuisance, predation on native wildlife, and spread of toxoplasmosis to both native animals and pastoral animals. Desexing and microchipping are longer term strategies that will address problems with overpopulation of cats and keeping cats at home can provide immediate local benefits for reducing nuisance such as spraying and toileting neighbour property and reducing predation. Keeping cats from defecating away from home also contribute to a reduction in the spread of toxoplasmosis to other animals and people.

Table 3: Other benefits of cat management

Benefit of Cat Management	Source
Reduces risk of disease transmission to people and other animals (e.g., ringworm, FIV).	Hosie et al., 2009; Stull et al., 2015
Reduces risk of disease transmission to people and other animals (e.g., ringworm, FIV).	Stull et al., 2015
Reduces risk of toxoplasmosis transmission to farmed animals.	Aguirre et al., 2019; Stelzer et al., 2019
Decreases predation pressure on native wildlife	Bell & Bell, 2003; Bellingham et al. 2010; Dowding & Murphy, 2003; Farnworth et al., 2013; Imber et al., 2003; Veitch et al., 2011
Decreases risk of toxoplasmosis transmission to native wildlife	Aguirre et al., 2019



A more detailed report related to the need for desexing and microchipping cats and keeping them at home has been conducted as part of the [National Cat Management Strategy Working Group Report](#).