

Declaration of the feral cat as an established pest animal on specified Crown land

Consultation summary



Aboriginal acknowledgement

The Victorian Government proudly acknowledges Victoria's Aboriginal community and their rich culture and pays respects to their Elders past and present.

We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely. We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal people and communities to Victorian life and how this enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards the equality of outcomes and ensuring an equal voice.

Photo credit

Cover image: NPWS Pest and Weed Unit

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Thank you to everyone who provided feedback on the proposed feral cat declaration.

Over 1,000 submissions were received, with more than 75% of survey respondents supporting the declaration of feral cats as pests.

There is strong community support for actions to protect Victoria's wildlife from feral cats, and also a wide range of views on how that can best be achieved.

Introduction

Cats have been in Australia since European settlement and can be classed into three broad categories: domestic, stray or semi-owned and feral.

Domestic cats are owned, and their care and needs are met by their owner.

Stray or semi-owned cats partly rely on humans for food and shelter (whether it is provided intentionally or not).

Feral cats are unowned and live completely independently of humans with respect to food and shelter and without veterinary care. Feral cats survive and reproduce in self-perpetuating populations in the wild.

Since their introduction, cats have established feral or wild populations in nearly all of our natural habitats. Research has found that these feral cat populations significantly impact some of our native fauna species through predation – even driving them to the point of extinction.

Feral cat declaration

On 26 July 2018, following consultation with the community, the Victorian Government declared the feral or wild population of the cat (feral cat) as an 'established pest animal' under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* (CaLP Act) in certain areas of Crown land in Victoria.

The objective of the feral cat declaration is to enable Crown land managers to humanely, and more efficiently and effectively control feral cats on specified Crown land to protect biodiversity and threatened wildlife.

The declaration of the feral cat as an established pest animal is in support of the 2016/2017 Victorian Parliamentary inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land which found that current Victorian legislation prevents effective control of feral cats and recommended the declaration of feral cats to be established pest animals under the CaLP Act.

The Victorian Government has delivered this reform as part of its broader long-term biodiversity protection agenda.

The Community consultation process

A consultation process was conducted from 30 April 2018 through to 20 May 2018 on the proposed feral cat declaration. The aim of consultation was to ensure the community's views and aspirations were heard before finalising the feral cat declaration. Consultation was also important to confirm whether the proposed declaration would pose a significant social or economic burden on any sector of the Victorian community.

The feedback submitted through the consultation process was analysed and considered when finalising the feral cat declaration. Feedback helped shape the proposed feral cat declaration, such as leading to the inclusion of Crown land managed by the Phillip Island Nature Park and Crown land managed by the four Alpine Resort Management Boards. The consultation summary has been prepared to highlight the range of views expressed.

Scope of the declaration

The scope of the proposed feral cat declaration provided for consultation was:

- The feral or wild population of the cat (*Felis catus*) (feral cat) would be declared as an established pest animal under the CaLP Act.
- The feral cat would be declared on specified Crown land managed by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and Parks Victoria.
- Only departmental and agency staff (and their agents) would be permitted to destroy a feral cat.

- Feral cats will not be declared as a pest animal on private land. Farmers and other private landholders will not be required to control feral cats.

Information about the proposed feral cat declaration, including information sheets, was provided on the DELWP Environment website. Stakeholders and community members had the opportunity to provide feedback via an online survey or providing a written submission to DELWP via email.

DELWP received 878 online survey responses and 29 written submissions from individuals and organisations regarding the proposed feral cat declaration. Nine organisations provided written submissions and 60 representatives of organisations completed the online survey.

DELWP also received 160 submissions that were part of a campaign.

Written submissions and online survey responses were provided by a diverse range of groups and as well as individual members of the community.

The submissions and responses reflected a wide range of views regarding feral cats and their control, and the proposed feral cat declaration.

The written campaign submissions focused on concerns regarding the science behind the effectiveness of lethal feral cat control and its humaneness; potential for the declaration to 'endorse' cruelty to cats; potential risks to the safety of domestic cats; and the consultation approach.

The following sections provide an overview of all feedback received.



Eastern Barred Bandicoot

Credit: David Paul

Support for the proposed feral cat declaration

There was a high level of support for the proposal to declare the feral cat as an established pest animal in Victoria. 77% of survey respondents (Figure 1) and nine written submissions provided support for the proposal. The impact of feral cats on biodiversity was highlighted as a key reason for support of the declaration.

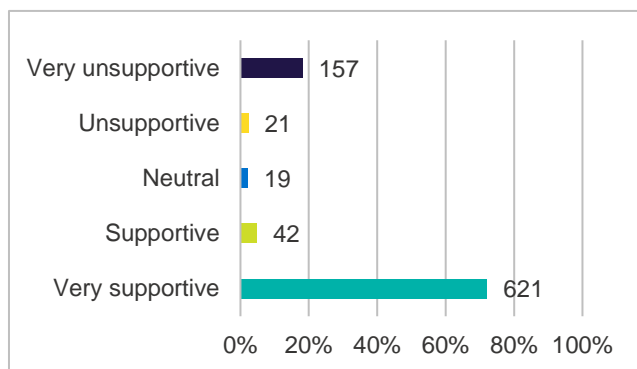


Figure 1: Responses to the survey question regarding level of support for the declaration of the feral cat as an established pest animal in Victoria.

'I own pet cats, love them but keep them confined to the house and an outdoor space that has been enclosed...I, nevertheless, recognise that like feral rabbits and foxes, feral cats are causing devastation to many native animals. This is why I am very supportive of the proposed declaration'. – Survey respondent

However, many respondents expressed concerns regarding the details of the declaration or suggested amendments to the proposed scope. These views have been captured as key themes.

Impacts of feral cats on biodiversity

Many respondents, and particularly the survey respondents, showed a high level of concern regarding the impact of feral cats on Victoria's biodiversity and threatened species, with 86% of survey respondents reporting a high level of concern (Figure 2).

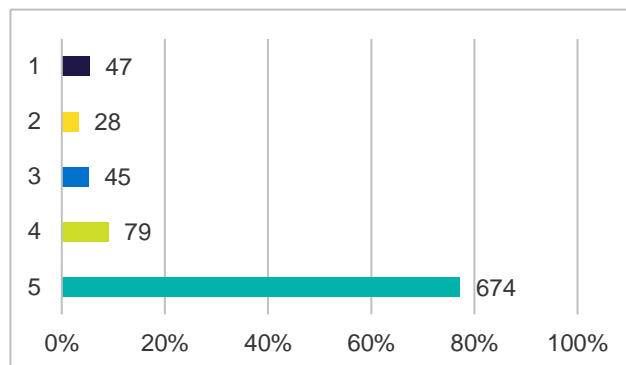


Figure 2: Responses to the survey question regarding concern about the impact of feral cats on Victoria's biodiversity and threatened species. (1=not at all concerned, 5=very concerned)

'Cats have an extraordinary impact on Victoria's native fauna, in particular adding to the decline of threatened species, international migratory birds and other native species. They are also implicated in the spread of diseases which may have impacts on native fauna'. – Survey respondent

However, a small number of respondents either did not consider feral cats to have a significant impact on biodiversity or felt that there are other issues that should be considered as a higher priority.

Respondents also clearly identified the importance of biodiversity protection as a priority of the feral cat declaration. 87% of survey respondents rated biodiversity protection as very important in the context of the feral cat declaration (Figure 3).

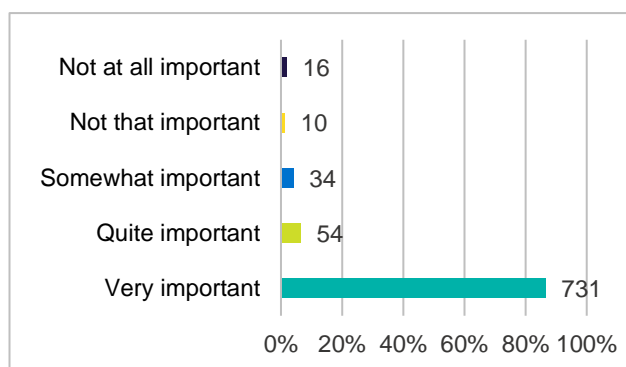


Figure 3: Responses to the survey question regarding the importance of protecting key biodiversity values and at-risk native wildlife in the context of the feral cat declaration.

While many respondents showed a strong awareness of the science demonstrating the high level of impact caused by feral cats on native fauna, a small number of respondents questioned this.

Overview of key themes

A high-level summary of the key themes identified through the consultation feedback received is provided below.

Area where the feral cat declaration applies

The proposed feral cat declaration stated that it would apply to specified Crown land managed by DELWP and Parks Victoria. The intention behind this is to ensure that action can be directed to areas that can best protect our most at risk native species.

‘Specified’ Crown land includes, but is not limited to, National Parks, State Forest and Nature Conservation Reserves.

While many respondents indicated that the proposed feral cat declaration is ‘a good start’, there were a large number of respondents who were dissatisfied with the limited area to which it applies.

211 survey respondents and two written submissions indicated a preference for the feral cat declaration to apply to a greater area of Victoria (Table 1). This included all Crown land (18 respondents) and/or private land (171 respondents).

Table 1: Survey responses regarding the area where the feral cat declaration applies.

Number of survey respondents who would prefer the declaration to be extended to:	
Unspecified, broader area	10
All Crown land	18
All Crown land and adjacent private land	6
All Crown land and private land under conservation covenants	6
Private land/all land	171
Total	211

There were also suggestions for specific types of private land to be included, for example private land adjoining Crown land (6 respondents) and private land managed for conservation (6 respondents).

In particular, many respondents suggested that the effectiveness of feral cat control programs could be limited without the inclusion of key areas of private land.

‘Across tenure pest management is important so impacts could be difficult to achieve without integrated management with private land holders’. – Survey respondent

However, some respondents acknowledged the importance of minimising impacts to free roaming domestic cats. A few of these respondents specifically requested that the scope of the declaration not be broadened to include private land.

As a result of feedback received through the consultation process, the scope of the feral cat declaration was broadened to include Crown land managed by Phillip Island Nature Parks and Crown land managed by the four Alpine Resort Management Boards.

Who is permitted to destroy a feral cat

The proposed feral cat declaration stated that only departmental and agency staff (and their agents) would be permitted to destroy a feral cat. This is in line with the objective of the declaration which is to require Crown land managers to control feral cats on specified Crown land to protect biodiversity and threatened wildlife.

This approach will enable feral cat control to be carefully planned and managed to avoid and address any potential animal welfare issues and help safeguard the safety of free-roaming domestic cats.

Under the feral cat declaration, ‘agents’ could include accredited volunteer shooters participating in strategic and targeted feral cat control operations on Crown land that are coordinated by DELWP or Parks Victoria.

Some respondents provided support for this approach, while the majority of respondents chose not to address this issue.

However, there were calls from some respondents for private landholders (including farmers) and licensed hunters (including recreational hunters) to contribute to feral cat control (Table 2). Similar numbers of survey respondents advocated for participation of private landholders (69) and licensed hunters (55) in feral cat control. Two written submissions also requested that recreational hunters be permitted to control feral cats.

A number of these respondents argued that there should be an obligation for private landholders to control feral cats on their own land.

Table 2: Survey responses regarding who is permitted to destroy a feral cat.

Number of survey respondents who would prefer the declaration to permit the following groups to control feral cats:	
An unspecified, broader group of people	7
All public land managers	5
Landowners/farmers	69
Licensed hunters	55
Community groups	1
Any person	5
Total	142

'There is also the ability for recreational hunters to opportunistically control feral cats while hunting other species on public land' – Written submission

Other respondents had concerns regarding the use of recreational hunters, including accredited volunteers, to control feral cats.

This highlights an important point that while the feral cat declaration does not apply to private land, private landholders are still able to manage cats roaming on their property in accordance with current laws.

Feral cat control

Another key topic that was raised by respondents was feral cat control methods. A range of views were expressed.

Several survey respondents spoke about the biodiversity benefits from lethal control of feral cats, including the need to reduce predation pressure on populations of threatened species.

However, a consistent theme, particularly in the campaign submissions, related to the science behind the effectiveness of lethal feral cat control.

A large number of respondents, including many of the campaign submissions, were very concerned about the humaneness of feral cat control methods, particularly the use of poison baits and soft-jaw leg-hold traps. In contrast, other respondents commented that all control options should be made available.

The feral cat declaration does not change the control techniques that are currently available.

A Victorian Feral Cat Management Code of Practice will be developed to ensure that best practice is implemented in feral cat control, to promote humane control options and minimise animal welfare issues. An adaptive management approach will be adopted, with different approaches taken in areas of Crown land close to human settlements (to avoid harming pet cats) and remote areas. All government employees (and their agents) will need to abide by this Code of Practice.

A common theme among respondents was the need to ensure that native wildlife is not impacted by feral cat control. Others were concerned about how people undertaking feral cat control would ensure pet cats were not accidentally destroyed (see section on safety of domestic cats).

The consultation responses also show that, for a sector of the community, any lethal control program – even for an established pest animal – is of concern.

'Trap, Neuter, Release' (TNR) programs, or similar approaches, were suggested as a more humane approach to control feral cats. However, a few survey respondents specifically opposed a TNR approach, citing the continued impact of the released feral cat on native wildlife for the remainder of its life.

Other suggested non-lethal feral cat control options included focusing on responsible cat ownership through de-sexing, confinement and education (see responsible cat ownership section for further detail) and the use of predator-proof exclusion fencing.

Responses relating to feral cat control highlight the importance of coordinated, strategic and targeted feral cat management programs. The Victorian Government will aim to deliver on these outcomes by ensuring that only departmental and agency staff (and their agents) deliver feral cat control in accordance with a Code of Practice and as part of coordinated programs.

Animal welfare

Animal welfare was of particular concern to a clear majority of survey respondents. It was a consistent theme in the written campaign submissions and was raised in several written submissions.

'All animals deserve to be treated with respect and deserve to be handled humanely'. – Survey respondent

Figure 4 shows that animal welfare issues are ‘quite important’ or ‘very important’ to a clear majority of survey respondents (77%).

In fact, Figure 4 probably somewhat understates the level of importance, as a number of survey respondents indicated in the free text fields that they were unsure whether this question referred to the welfare of feral cats, native wildlife, or both.

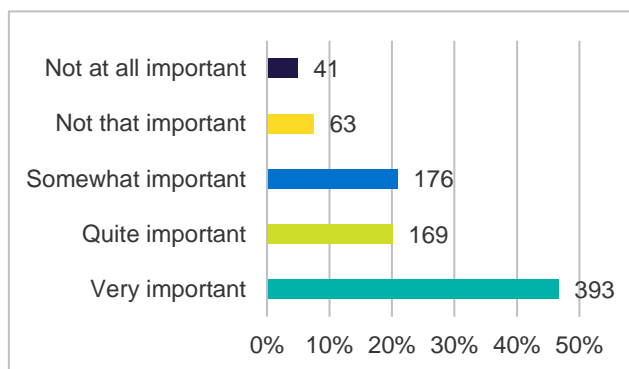


Figure 4: Responses to the survey question regarding the importance of addressing potential animal welfare issues in the context of the feral cat declaration.

Some respondents were concerned that poisons or leg-hold traps would be automatically allowed and used as control methods.

The feral cat declaration does not change the control techniques that are currently available.

Many respondents were specifically concerned about cruelty to cats. Several survey responses, and many of the written campaign submissions, raised concerns that the feral cat declaration could ‘endorse’ or provide legitimacy for cruelty to cats, whether domestic, stray or semi-owned, or feral.

Another sector of the community felt that while the welfare of all creatures is important, the welfare of native wildlife needs to be considered paramount in this instance.

The responses reaffirm to DELWP that animal welfare is a key priority for the community, and it is important that the Victorian Feral Cat Management Code of Practice helps to ensure that all actions give appropriate consideration to animal welfare.

It is clear that the community has a strong interest in how the welfare of feral cats will be managed and impacts on native wildlife, as a result of feral cat control, will be reduced. The Victorian Government will consult with animal welfare groups in the development of the Code of Practice.

Deliberate or reckless animal cruelty is unacceptable, and DELWP supports prosecutions under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986* where appropriate.

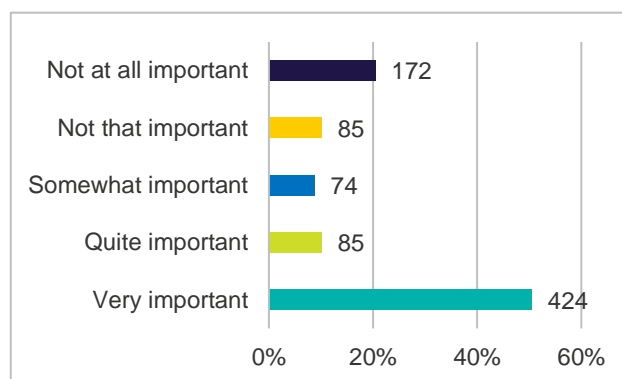
Safety of domestic cats

A significant number of survey respondents – including many who supported the proposed feral cat declaration in principle – raised concerns as to how feral cat control would ensure that domestic and stray cats were not inadvertently impacted.

‘...we are concerned that there will be unintended consequences for domestic owned cats that may roam onto public land adjacent to residential areas’. – Written submission

The need to account for the potential presence of free-roaming domestic cats on Crown land was considered ‘quite important’ or ‘very important’ to 61% of survey respondents (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Responses to the survey question regarding the importance of accounting for the potential presence of free-roaming domestic cats on Crown land in the context of the feral cat declaration.



A high number of respondents were dissatisfied with the proposed approach to account for free-roaming cats.

There was also concern, particularly among campaign respondents, that enabling feral cats to be killed would lead to a perception that the lives of domestic cats were not valued.

On the other hand, there were also a considerable number of respondents who argued that the onus needed to be on pet owners to ensure that pet cats were not ‘free roaming’ on Crown land.

It is possible that the supporting materials did not provide enough detail explaining how the proposed feral cat declaration had been designed to minimise the impact on pet cats.

Limiting where the declaration applies to specified Crown land and who can implement feral cat control

to departmental and agency staff (and their agents) are important approaches, designed in part, to minimise the impact of feral cat control on free-roaming domestic cats. The need for operational approaches that minimise the risk to pet cats roaming on Crown land (and other non-target species) will also be key components of the Code of Practice.

Responsible cat ownership

A significant number of responses highlighted the need for responsible cat ownership in Victoria, including 223 survey respondents and 29 written or campaign submissions.

Many respondents noted that native wildlife faces serious threats not just from feral cats, but from stray or semi-owned and roaming domestic cats as well.

Specific suggestions regarding how to encourage 'responsible' cat ownership amongst Victorians fell into three categories: regulations, education and incentives.

There was especially strong support for statewide laws for the confinement of domestic cats (including cat curfews) and for mandatory de-sexing.

There were also calls for stronger penalties for people dumping unwanted cats or kittens.

There was strong support for public education regarding the importance of confining cats to the home environment (both for the protection of wildlife and the welfare of the cats themselves) and the importance of de-sexing cats.

Incentives, including government subsidised de-sexing programs were proposed by some respondents.

The Victorian Government recognises that domestic cats are important companion animals for many Victorians, and that responsible cat ownership has many benefits.

Responsible pet ownership includes caring for your pet's welfare needs; registering, microchipping and de-sexing your pet; and complying with any applicable local requirements for keeping cats on your property.

The Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (DEDJTR) regulates domestic animals in Victoria. Further information on the needs of domestic cats and how to ensure they are safely confined is available at: www.agriculture.vic.gov.au/pets/cats.

Zoos Victoria and RSPCA Victoria's 'Safe Cat, Safe Wildlife' campaign provides pet owners with advice and support to keep their cat in the home environment. Please visit <http://www.safecat.org.au> for more information about this campaign.

DELWP will continue to work with DEDJTR and organisations such as Zoos Victoria and RSPCA Victoria to encourage responsible pet ownership.



Superb Fairy-wren

Credit: Marcia Riederer

Conclusion

We have heard the support

The responses showed, very clearly, that there is strong community support for actions to protect Victoria's wildlife, and a strong acknowledgement that feral cats are an important threat to biodiversity that needs to be addressed. An overwhelming majority of respondents, outside of the campaign, supported the declaration of the feral cat as a pest animal.

Many survey respondents indicated surprise that feral cats have not already been declared a pest species, and many messages contained encouragement to 'get on with it'.

We have heard the concerns

The most common message heard, particularly through the survey, was that the proposed feral cat declaration should cover a broader area. There were also some respondents who would prefer a broader range of people to be able to participate in feral cat control actions.

While many respondents indicated that the proposed feral cat declaration was 'a good start' or 'an important first step', there was also a large number who were dissatisfied with its limited scope.

In particular, many respondents suggested that the effectiveness of feral cat control programs could be limited without also including key areas of private land.

In addition, other concerns raised included:

- that domestic and stray cats could be caught and accidentally killed in feral cat control programs;
- that feral cats should not be subject to lethal control, especially if control measures result in pain or distress;
- that declaring feral cats to be a pest could 'endorse' or provide legitimacy for cruelty to cats, whether domestic, stray or semi-owned, or feral; and
- a lack of confidence in the efficacy of lethal feral cat control methods.

DELWP has heard these concerns and would like to reaffirm its commitment to upholding the highest standards of animal welfare and to minimise any unintended impact on free-roaming domestic cats and other wildlife.

DELWP has also heard the feedback related to how feral cat control will be implemented. While operational issues were outside the scope of the declaration itself (the actual legal instrument), the feedback will be captured in the development of a Victorian Feral Cat Management Code of Practice. The Code of Practice will set out the approach that Crown land managers must take when planning and implementing feral cat control.

There were also common misunderstandings that emerged through the responses, indicating we weren't clear enough in our supporting information.

A common misunderstanding was that the declaration is *aimed* at stray (semi-owned) cats, or roaming domestic cats, in suburban or populated rural areas. The declaration only applies to specified areas of Crown land in Victoria, such as National Parks. The declaration does not apply to private land, where the chance of encountering a free-roaming domestic or stray cat is higher.

We have heard the calls for more responsible cat ownership

Another key theme in the consultation feedback was the need for stronger regulation and education regarding responsible ownership of domestic cats.

Many respondents noted that native wildlife faces serious threats not just from feral cats, but from stray or semi-owned and roaming domestic cats as well.

There was strong support for laws to enforce confinement of cats, and for education of cat owners.

DELWP will continue to work across government and other organisations to encourage responsible pet ownership.



Thick-tailed Gecko

Credit: Marcia Riederer