

# Submission to Pest Animal Management Review Draft Report

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## Opening

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) is the peak body for councils in NSW, representing general-purpose councils and associate members including 12 special-purpose county councils and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council. LGNSW facilitates the development of an effective community-based system of local government in NSW.

LGNSW welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Natural Resources Commission's (NRC) draft report into its review of pest animal management in NSW. Councils have a role in managing pest animals on land they have care and control of, and also play a substantial role in promoting community awareness of pest species through their bushland management teams. In times of plague conditions councils often become first point of call for residents complaints and work collaboratively with other pest managers. Council also have regulatory responsibilities under the *Companion Animals Act 1998*.

The local government sector is currently under a significant strain with numerous changes for both the elected council and staff still in train. As such, a limited response from the sector to the NRC's draft report should not be interpreted as disinterest. Note that we have looked to cross-reference our comments against the NRC's recommendations wherever possible, but have not systematically addressed each recommendation.

## Response

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) welcomes the NRC's review as an opportunity to improve the way pest animals are managed in NSW. The draft report is a useful and comprehensive review of the current status of pest management in the State.

Local government agrees with the high-level views that there is a need to prioritise efforts in managing pest species in line with the invasion curve, and to undertake a coordinated approach where all parties are aware of and undertake their responsibilities.

### State Level Leadership & Accountability

LGNSW supports the adoption of core components for State-level planning as outlined in Recommendation 1. These include prioritising government resources based on greater return on investment from prevention and eradication of new incursions; the need for a cross-tenure approach; people are fundamental to making solutions work and need to be supported to ensure they are fully engaged; ongoing research and development is prioritised; red tape is reduced; existing funding is maintained and new shared funding initiatives are developed to address targeted needs.

Section 3.1.2 of the draft report discusses the merits of the Biodiversity Advisory Committee (BAC) subsuming the Pest Animal Council functions, and membership of the former being broadened to reflect the expanded responsibilities to include representation from local government, amongst others. LGNSW supports the merging of the Pest Animal Council and the BAC, and strongly supports local government representation on the BAC. In fact LGNSW advocated for local government to be represented on the BAC when it was first established, due to local government's responsibilities in weed management, as a public land manager and as a key avenue for communicating with local communities.

### Regional and local planning

Local Government NSW is supportive of approaches to coordinate pest management actions at the local and regional scales, as this delivers a more thorough and long term solution. Mirroring the approach taken for weed management i.e. establishment of regional committees, is a sensible option. Councils are well placed to inform Local Land Services (LLS) as they develop regional pest management plans. However, the capacity of councils to participate in regional pest committees may be limited and/or vary considerably across LLS regions due to resourcing constraints.

The development of a model/template for the preparation of local, sub-regional or regional strategic pest control plans would be very useful. This is the scale at which programs are most effective and would allow councils, LLS and other authorities to coordinate knowledge, stakeholders and actions leading to coordinated effort. Some councils are developing local feral pest animal control and management strategies, such as Coffs Harbour City Council's Vertebrate Pest Draft Management Strategy 2009. Providing support to councils to prepare such plans so that they tie in with and support regional pest management plans would assist with ensuring greater coordination within regions and a relative consistency between regions (noting that priorities may vary between regions).

It will also be important to adequately resource LLS to work with landholders and stakeholders to develop regional pest management plans. Each plan must be underpinned by good communication and stakeholder commitment if it is to be effective. Without this, implementation of regional plans could fall short.

LGNSW is supportive of establishing a regional pest management coordinator within each LLS to coordinate collective on-ground action and build capacity and awareness (Recommendation 11). As raised in our submission to the NRC's Issues paper, councils generally consider there has been a lack of formal coordination at regional level, particularly with no clear leader assigned. In some areas, councils have stepped into the void to provide some sub-regional coordination, often as it helps to maximise the efficiency of their own programs. Regional coordination efforts to date have often been a reflection of limited resources within LLS, and assigning a dedicated officer in each LLS to undertake this function could substantially improve efficiency and effectiveness of pest control programs.

Examples exist of successful regional cooperation across councils and other public land managers, including the Sydney north region and their coordinated fox baiting of urban bushland reserves and local National Parks. This regional arrangement has been in place for over 10 years and has seen a reduction in the impacts of fox predation on native wildlife and a significant improvement in the sustainability and diversity of native wildlife occurring in remnant urban bushland across the region. Expanding opportunities for councils and land managers to be supported in regional approaches to pest management are welcomed.

### **Urban and Peri-Urban Pest Animals**

Recommendation 3(viii) of the draft report calls for LLS and local governments to define areas of responsibility at the urban-rural interface with the aim of maximising pest animal control program effectiveness. LGNSW's submission on the NRC's issues paper was very supportive of clarifying roles and responsibilities for pest animal planning and management and we reiterate our support for greater clarity.

Recommendation 21(i) calls for the adoption and resourcing of a strategic risk-based approach to managing urban and peri-urban pest animals. In particular, it is proposed that the State

government work with local government to provide cost recovery and practical techniques to manage pests such as Indian myna birds. This is supported. A number of councils have successful programs that provide guidance and equipment to trap and humanely manage pest birds. Funding (and staff resourcing to manage /educate) is often the limiting factor in the how widespread these programs are. Often programs start on the basis of grant funding but they may not continue once the support funding ceases.

### **Companion Animals Act**

Compliance and enforcement of current provisions in the *Companion Animals Act 1998* are currently an issue. For example, some councils have found that despite the Act giving them the ability to declare wildlife protection areas, the courts have not always upheld fines or other controls issued in relation to these areas. Without adequate backing of the legislation by the courts, councils are hamstrung in their ability to implement the Act, which increases the risk of further pest animals in the environment.

The NRC has recommended that the Act be amended to *enable* councils to declare cat confinement areas. While we appreciate this is not a mandatory provision, if there is a desire for councils to use this provision it must be recognised that additional resources will be required to implement and enforce it. And as outlined above, the courts must be willing to enforce any such new provision.

The *Companion Animals Act 1998* currently covers domesticated dogs and cats, however there is support for domestic rabbits to also be covered by the Act. Domestic rabbits have infiltrated bushland areas in peri-urban and metropolitan areas such as Pittwater. Rabbit desexing is difficult and has high mortality rates, which discourages owners from pursuing this option. Escaped pets therefore pose a high risk of multiplying and becoming pests in an area. In Queensland the keeping of domestic rabbits is prohibited and carries significant fines in the order of \$44,000. While it may not be appropriate to move from the current situation to a complete ban on keeping domestic rabbits within this reform process, stronger controls are warranted. We note that prescribing additional animals to be regulated under the Act also carries increased need for enforcement and compliance resourcing of local government to undertake that task effectively.

### Animal hoarding

The hoarding of animals in a domestic setting has the ability to contribute to the pest animal problem in the wider community if animals are not adequately confined and managed. For example, cats escaping into surrounding properties not only hunt other wildlife but present the risk of spreading toxoplasmosis, which can harm agricultural interests. This issue does not appear to have been discussed by the NRC in its report.

Some councils have identified that the current legislation is quite limited in enabling councils to deal with animal hoarding. Councils can issue s124 orders (sub-section 18) under the *Local Government Act 1993* to restrict the number of animals, but the validity of issuing such an order for animal welfare reasons has only recently been tested in the courts and confirmed. Hurdles such as these, where the legislation is unclear or silent, make councils' job of implementing the legislation (and ultimately preventing emergence of pest animals in the landscape) cumbersome, expensive and time consuming.

### **Pest animal status**

LGNSW supports Recommendation 16 which recommends managing all species of feral deer as declared pests and not as game animals. Feral deer are a growing problem in several areas of NSW including Sutherland, Great Lakes and Port Macquarie. Deers can create substantial damage (e.g. in road accidents and train strikes, through damage to fences and property) and ecological impacts.

Managing a species as a game animal purports to a level of accepted protection of residual and new populations of what would otherwise be a pest (or introduced) species. In this light, wild deer need to be managed as a pest animal, with eradication of localised populations (if possible) and constant suppression of widespread populations such that ecological and productivity consequences are confined.

Similarly, we would support non-indigenous species (game birds that pose extreme threat) being regulated in a way that is commensurate with the risk they pose (Recommendation 5).

### **Relationship to NRM and other reforms**

Pest control in the form of baiting, trapping, shooting or viruses are often quite effective. However the merits of supporting a healthy natural environment, which is often less attractive to pest species, should also be considered. For example, the NRC recognises in its draft report that the common or Indian myna exploits and invades modified, urbanised or disturbed landscapes and rarely invades natural bushland. Mechanisms that support the protection and improvement of native bushland should be prioritised. There are opportunities with the current biodiversity reforms to encourage land managers to manage native vegetation in good condition, and these should be promoted.

### **Data, research and development**

Recommendation 27 proposes the adoption of standardised data collection, and this is supported. Understanding the scale and extent of the problem is critically important to managing pests as early as possible within the invasion curve, in prioritising on-ground effort and in identifying incursion pathways and new incursions.

The Invasive Animals CRC provides a critically important research and development function for pest animal management. LGNSW supports long-term funding of this function by the NSW Government, to provide stability and encourage and support strategic survey and mapping of feral pest animal distribution and abundance that is coordinated, repeatable and statistically-valid (Recommendation 26).

### **Conclusion**

LGNSW is broadly supportive of the recommendations made by the NRC in its draft report. We have commented on the key recommendations of relevance to local government and made suggestions where relevant. LGNSW would be happy to discuss these suggestions or this submission in general with the NRC as it finalises its recommendations.