

Australian Veterinary Association Policy framework



What to do about unwanted dogs and cats

The policy framework is a tool to increase the AVA's advocacy strength by creating strong and consistent messages across the many jurisdictions involved in companion animal regulation, and the many AVA members involved in the issues. Governments will not just be dealing with their local representative or community vet, but will be hearing the expert advice of the national professional veterinary body. And they also have the assurance that governments all over Australia are being given the same clear, concise and complete expert advice.

This is an internal reference document that explains the framework and some of the current issues it covers in more depth. The framework itself is for use by AVA representatives when advocating to governments about unwanted companion animal issues. This explanatory document is for **internal reference only**.

The frequently asked questions can be used as a resource when responding verbally to common questions about unwanted companion animals and policy responses.

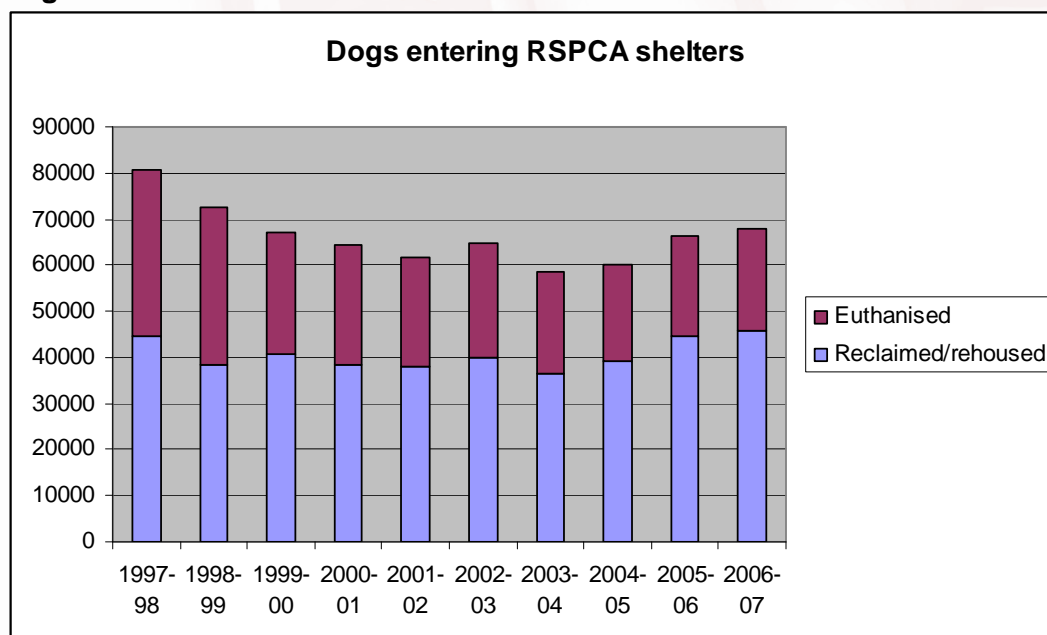
Frequently asked questions

How big is the problem really, and is it getting worse?

One of the really big issues is a lack of reliable data on the problem. However, there are some indicators that suggest euthanasia rates are gradually declining.

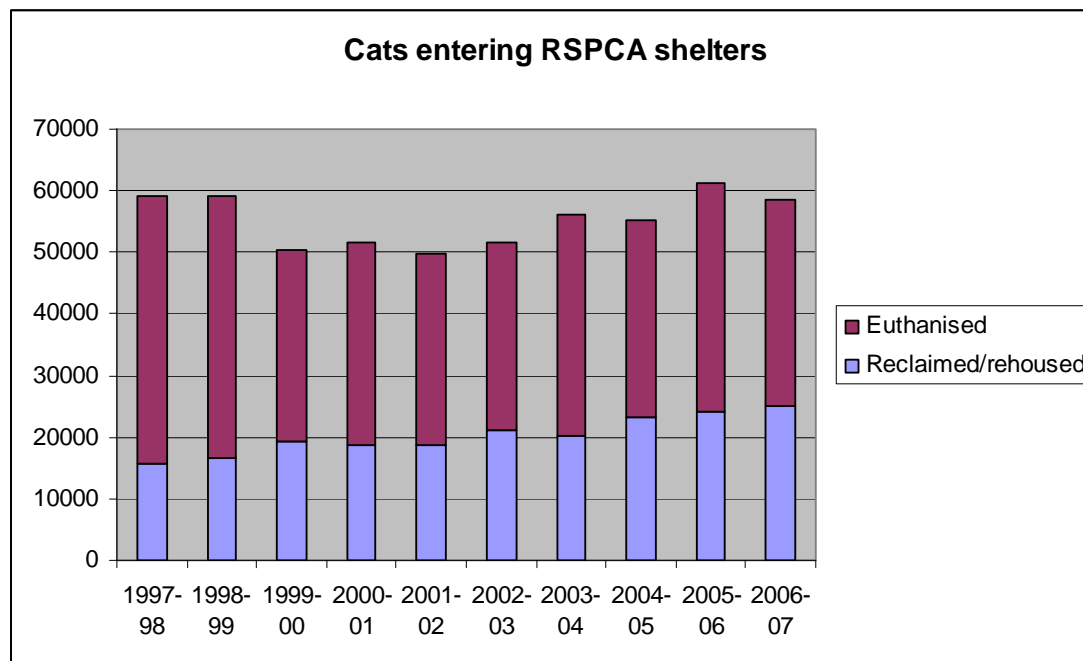
National figures from the RSPCA¹ show a slight general downward trend in the numbers of both dogs and cats entering RSPCA shelters, as well as the numbers being euthanased. The situation state by state varies slightly from these averages, and the figures are only from RSPCA shelters. However, there's no evidence that the problem is on the rise. There is obviously still a significant problem of unwanted companion animals in Australia.

Dogs



¹ <http://www.rspca.org.au/resource/stats.asp>

Cats



Surely mandatory desexing would help solve the problem?

Mandatory desexing was introduced into the Australian Capital Territory in 2001 and thoroughly researched. It had no discernible effect on the numbers of dogs and cats euthanased.² There is no reason to think that introducing it anywhere else will have any effect either. In some jurisdictions in the US, mandatory desexing is being phased out. Costs of enforcement can be very high³, and without enforcement the strategy can be ineffective⁴.

What about unscrupulous breeders?

There's no doubt that there are unscrupulous breeders in Australia who don't care about animal welfare, or whether they're contributing to overpopulation. There are also breeders who do care about these issues and look after their animals well. Regulations vary from state to state, but in many cases the regulations are sound, and the problem is enforcement.

There's no scientific evidence about whether pet breeders are contributing to the levels of unwanted pets euthanased. Until there's more data on the sources of euthanased animals, all sources of pets for sale should be regulated to ensure high levels of animal welfare and to encourage responsible pet ownership. Regulations should be strictly enforced and compliance accurately measured.

More regulation would be a good thing wouldn't it?

In general, better regulation is needed for all sources of pets for sale – breeders, pet shops, animal rescuers, pounds and shelters. However in many jurisdictions the regulations are already in place, and it's enforcement and compliance that are the problems, not the rules themselves.

Don't pet shops encourage impulse buying and puppy mills?

There's little information available about where animals that end up at the pound or shelter come from. There's also no evidence to suggest that animals purchased from pet shops are any less loved or any less well cared for than animals from other sources.

² Australian Veterinary Association Centre for Companion Animals in the Community (n.d) Mandatory desexing in the ACT – has it worked? available at http://www.ccac.net.au/files/Mandatory_Desexing_in_the_ACT_Cats.pdf

³ Allen L (2006) Are mandatory spay/neuter laws that target everyone really the answer in efforts to reduce shelter intake and euthanasia rates? Animal Law Coalition, available at <http://network.bestfriends.org/animalawcoalition>

⁴ Bartlett (2006) Numbers test conventional wisdom on "pet overpopulation" (editorial), Animal People, December available at <http://www.animalpeoplenews.org/VIDEO/dec2006.swf>

A Victorian study found that just 8% of cats and just 11% of dogs are obtained from pet shops. By comparison, the same studies revealed that the number of dogs obtained from breeders was 22% and 30%. More cats were purchased from welfare shelters (13% and 22%).⁵

What can be done about unwanted cats?

There are a lot of unanswered questions about how to manage the problem of unwanted cats. The damage that feral cats do to the natural environment is a major concern for policy makers.

Unfortunately, a lot of research simply reveals the strategies that haven't worked to address the problem. Some of the subjects that require more research are:

- Humane and economical methods of limiting feral and stray cat populations
- How urban cats live and how the relationship between rubbish, rodents and cats can be used to control populations
- Effectiveness of techniques such as night curfews for cats and simultaneous removal of unowned cats.

The strategies recommended by the AVA include:

- Excellent owner education to maximise desexing and restricting cat movements to the owner's premises
- Microchip identification
- Public education about what to do with stray cats (ie. don't feed them, take ownership and responsibility or take them to a pound or shelter)
- Allocating adequate resources to animal management and control by governments

⁵ Toukhatsi SR, Coleman GJ and Bennett PB (2005) Final Report for the project: Community attitudes and behaviours towards cats, Melbourne: Animal Welfare Science Centre, Dept Psychology, Monash University, for the Bureau of Animal Welfare, Victoria.