



BRIEFING NOTES FOR MINISTER IAN MACDONALD

A group of peak animal health and welfare organisations are unanimous in their rejection of the proposed Animals (Regulation of Sale) Bill 2008.

The Australian Veterinary Association, the Animal Welfare League NSW, the Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association, Dogs NSW, Sydney Dog and Cat Home and the Pet Industry Association of Australia are concerned that instead of improving the health and welfare of companion animals, the bill will make matters worse.

These organisations have a common objective of promoting responsible pet ownership, which benefits both pets and the community.

These peak bodies support a well-regulated pet industry that protects the welfare of animals and preserves the right of people to own a pet of their choice. This bill does not do that. The danger of this bill is that it gives the appearance of solving a problem when it may actually make things worse. The proposed bill could actually cause more unnecessary deaths of dogs and cats and drive the development of a black market in pets.

We support the government in the implementation of strong, enforceable codes of practice for pet shops, breeders and shelters and pounds.

The major issue that the bill tries to address, and is of concern for our organisations and the public, is determining a way to reduce the number of unwanted dogs and cats in NSW that are euthanased yearly.

Below we have provided you (where available) relevant data from scientific literature.

The euthanasia of unwanted companion animals is a complex issue. Only a range of complementary strategies can achieve the objective of reducing the euthanasia rate of unwanted cats and dogs. These strategies must be based on a sound understanding of the local situation supported by well-researched evidence for effectiveness, and adequately resourced to evaluate their effectiveness.

We have concluded with recommendations as to how to most effectively address these issues while ensuring that these recommendations are not cost prohibitive

Important statistics

Number of dogs and cats in NSW

1,219,000 dogs (estimate)

804,000 cats (estimate)

Source: BIS Shrapnel (2006)

In Australia 53% of households own companion animals

37.3% of households own at least one dog

25.3% of households own at least one cat

Source: BIS Shrapnel 2006)

Where do owners acquire their dogs/cats from?

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

Source :Toukhatsi et al (2005)

A similar study found that 9% cats and 14% dogs were purchased from pet shops, with 30% of dogs being purchased from breeders and 22% of cats from welfare shelters.

Source: Pawsey C (2005)

(Neither study clearly defined “breeder”).

Number of dogs and cats that are admitted to a pound/shelter yearly NSW and yearly trends

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 RSPCA 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.

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

What percentage of animals admitted to the pound are euthanased?

Data recently collated by the NSW Government (Maree Garrett, pers. comm.) identifies that there has been a reduction in the overall shelter/pound euthanasia of dogs from 56% in 2001 to 43% in 2006-07. By contrast 77% of shelter cats were euthanised in 2001 and the euthanasia rate has marginally increased to 78% in 2007

Source: Marston et al (2008)

Euthanasia rate from admissions

RSPCA (NSW) Cats 1997-98 78%, 2001-02 57% 2006-07 62%

RSPCA (NSW) Dogs 1997-98 41% 2001-02 41% 2006-07 39%

Why are the animals admitted to the pound?

Unwanted cat litters are mostly from feral and semi-owned cat populations.

Dogs are mostly surrendered due to temperament or health problems.

Source: Marston et al (2008)

Research has found that most dogs ending up in pounds are owned, and most have been surrendered by their owners. This is usually because of behavioural problems, though a change in the living situation of the owner is also a common reason.

Source: Salman, MD, et al (1998)

With cats, the majority of those ending up at the pound are not owned, being either stray or feral animals. A Victorian university study found that 80% of cats entering three major shelters had no owners or were semi-owned.

Marston, L et al (2006)

Existing research has shown that euthanasia in pounds and shelters is rarely because an owner has too many animals

Of the animals euthanised what is the reason for euthanasia?

Reasons for euthanasia dogs (Victoria study)

- 28.92% health reasons
- 40.58% aggression and behavioural problems
- 4.1% due to restricted breed (Pit Bull)
- 26.42% other reasons

“Very few dogs are killed in Australia because there are more dogs available than homes. Dogs and puppies are euthanised in shelters more frequently because they are not suited to available homes, rather than because there are no homes available.” Source: Marston et al (2008)

With both cats and dogs, the behavioural and health problems they bring with them to the pound often make them unsuitable for rehoming. This is especially the case with animals rescued from animal hoarders and others who house multiple animals in sub-standard conditions. Many of these animals have to be euthanased due to poor health or behaviour that's unsuitable for a domestic pet. There is clear linkage in the USA and in Australia that animal rescuers and animal breeders are responsible for significant percentages of the dogs and cats that come to shelters. This strengthens the case for the government to implement codes for both breeders and for pounds and shelters.

It's important to remember that many animals in pounds and shelters are not suitable for adoption. An analysis of RSPCA's Yagoona shelter in Sydney showed that 98% of dogs destroyed during 2004-05 were unfit to be rehomed due to poor health, old age or unsuitable temperament. Eighty-nine per cent of cats euthanased were also unfit for adoption.

Source: Lawrie, M and Awad, M (2007)

NSW DLG figures have shown that there are much higher rates of euthanasia for dogs in country council jurisdictions. Many of these dogs are of the working dog, working dog cross variety.

Source: Prendergas M et al

Other important facts

Companion animals contribute \$46.2 billion to Australian economy yearly

Source: BIS Shrapnel (2006)

Up to 95% of owned animals are never admitted to a shelter or pound, much less euthanased. Source: Headey (2006)

Extremely high desexing rates are reported for registered dogs and cats.

Source: Marston et al (2008)

There is a high level of voluntary compliance with desexing in owned animals – 93% for owned cats and 78% for owned dogs.

Source: (Heady, B (2006)

Problems in dogs and cats are different and need different solutions. Most healthy sociable dogs are rehomed. While up to 40% of euthanased kittens are rehomedable Source: Marston et al (2008)

Semi-owned cat population – In Victoria 22% of the population were feeding cats they do not own. Source: Marston et al (2008)

Information gaps

There are important gaps in information, particularly statistics relating specifically to the New South Wales situation.

If these questions can be reliably answered, effective policy solutions to euthanasia rates will be easier to establish.

- What percentage of dogs and cats are microchipped?
- **How many dogs and cats** are euthanased in pounds/shelters yearly in NSW, why, and where do they come from?
All studies and statistics that we could find on this are non-current or very inaccurate. The last major study was performed by the DLG in May 2002 on statistics from the 2000/01 year and as such is outdated. Source: Garrett M, (2002)
- What percentage of animals admitted to the pound are rehomed?
- What percentage of animals admitted to the pound are moved to a rescuer?
- How long on average do rescue animals remain with the rescuer before being rehomed?
- How many rehomed dogs and cats from pounds/rescuers reappear in pounds/shelters?
- Where are the animals admitted to pounds acquired from?

The main reason there is a lack of reliable data is that there is no common set of statistics across pounds and shelters in NSW.

Recommendations

1. Critical Knowledge Gap

- 1) Develop Key Performance Indicators to assess outcomes and ensure that this information can be collected accurately.
 - i. Include in the Shelter/Pound Codes of Practice the requirement for all shelter, pounds and rescue groups to provide specific, accurate records; that are independently reviewed. It needs to be clear as to what information they are to collect.
 - ii. Ensure that when an animal is initially microchipped that information is obtained as to where the animal is acquired from. (Companion Animal Regulations 2008 Part 2(8))
 - iii. Include in the Pet Shop Code of Practice the requirement to submit a yearly report for the collection of key information, such as numbers of pets sold, numbers acquired from different sources, returns, euthanasias

2) Provide funding based for pilot studies or further research.

2. Follow the following 4 Key Principles

- 1) **Education** – education about socially responsible pet ownership is a powerful strategy. Public education about how to react to stray cats is very important (i.e. don't feed them, but either take ownership or take them to a pound). The NSW Government could consider using the “Who cares for cats?” strategy from Victoria.

Provision of point of sale information on responsible pet ownership.

“Animal management issues that arise from owned animals are generally accepted to be people problems rather than animal problems. Therefore to effect change is necessary to modify the behaviour of the owners. Education is the best method of achieving this.”

Source: Marston et al (2008)

- 2) **Identification** – microchipping for all pets is vital to ensure that lost animals can be returned to their owners. Without enforced microchipping laws it is impossible to identify and isolate the semi-owned and feral cat population.

Ensure that when an animal is initially microchipped that information is obtained as to where the animal is acquired from. The Companion Animal Regulation 2008 - Part 2(8) Identification information in relation to all categories of companion animals; needs to be amended to include this information on the P1A Companion Animals Register – Permanent Identification form.

- 3) **Targeted programs** – strategies to address specific problems in local jurisdictions have often been shown to be effective. These might include low-cost desexing alongside public education about the best way to deal with stray neighbourhood cats. Providing adequate resources is absolutely crucial.

An excellent example is the AVA/RSPCA CAWS program which combines community education, local media awareness and targeted desexing programs in regional and remote areas of NSW. Resources are collaborated from the RSPCA, the AVA, local councils, local veterinarians, government departments and schools

- 4) **Increase regulation, compliance and enforcement for all sources of companion animals** – controls and compliance to limit the risks of overpopulation are important components. Ensuring enough resources are allocated to enforcement is vital for new regulations to have any effect on euthanasia rates. Standard, enforceable regulations for breeding, keeping and selling companion animals are vital to reduce impulse buying, poor animal welfare outcomes, and euthanasia rates. These should be applied equally to pet shops, registered breeders, backyard breeders, pounds, shelters and animal rescuers. All sub-standard facilities breeding or housing animals for sale should be closed down permanently. All councils should be required to have impounding facilities for cats. All Councils should desex all surrendered or impounded dogs and cats before they are rehomed to new owners (only animals returned to their owners are excluded from this requirement).

References

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