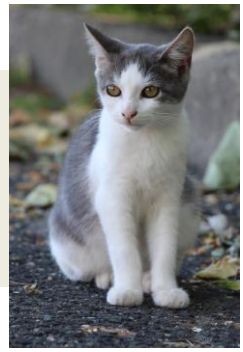
Healthy Herds, Happy Cats: A One Welfare Approach to Farm Life

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Background



- In Australia, cats **not classified** as working animals
  - in contrast to USA & UK
  - 'must be trained from young age'
- **No tax relief** for their care (unlike dogs/horses)
- Limited recognition of value of desexing & care as welfare and biosecurity tool



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Aims

Aims: Explore the value dairy farmers place on cats on the farm

1. Are cats of value as working cats to dairy farmers?

2. Farmers' views on the Australian Tax Office classifying cats on farms as working cats

Feline Farmhands: The Value of Working Cats to Australian Dairy Farmers—A Case for Tax Deductibility

Caitlin Crawford, Jacquie Rand, Olivia Forge, Vanessa Rohlf, Pauleen Bennett and Rebekah Scotney. *Animals 2025, 15, 800*

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Aims

Aims: Explore how cat management methods impact the psychological wellbeing of farmers, the welfare of the cats & views on a Barn Cat Program.

1. Explore cat–farmer relationships.

2. Farmers' experiences before and after involvement in farm-cat management program based on free cat desexing & perception of success

3. Farmers' views on a Barn Cat Program

A Purr-Suasive Case for Sterilization: How Sterilizing Working Cats Supports Dairy Farmers' Wellbeing, Improves Animal Welfare, and Benefits the Environment

Caitlin Crawford, Jacquie Rand, Olivia Forge, Vanessa Rohlf, Pauleen Bennett and Rebekah Scotney. *Animals2025, 15, 766.*

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Methods

- 15 participants across 9 dairy farms (Ipswich QLD & Bega NSW)
- Farms were part of two free cat desexing programs
  - 9/10 farms involved
- Qualitative methodology
- Semi-structured interviews
- Thematic analysis



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Results



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Rodent impacts: *Infrastructure damage*

Rodents just got into the wiring and stuff to run the dairy, and you can't have breakdowns in the dairy - it's gotta go twice a day, every day.'

'Well, basically the wiring had to be replaced all the time. Every two months he was coming to replace wiring that had been eaten.'



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Rodent impacts: *Infrastructure damage*

"Before the cats, we had a telly-handler eaten [by rats]. All the rubber hosing and the wiring, and it cost us about $45,000 to get that one machine going again."





"I would say at least two or three thousand dollars a year, trying to fix those things [wiring chewed by rats]. It could be a lot more, but as an average year, that would be easy."

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Rodent Impacts - *Damage to Food Stores*



'And in the hay shed as well, like the mice, if they take over the cereal hay crop in the hay shed, [they] just demolish it.'



'The rats and mice eat the feed that we had stored for the cows and seed we'd stored. You'd find mice and rats in the bags that are stored … they chew holes in bags.'

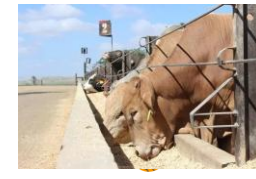
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Rodent Impacts: *Livestock and Human Health*



'I guess it's a human health thing too, like with the milk and everything that's around, we don't want rodents.

The contamination of the grain which feeds the cows. Cows eat the faeces and then cows get sick and just that health issue, plus the stink as well.'



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Rodent Impacts: *Attracting Snakes*

"I would roll back the plastic to bring out the new silage & there would always be dozens of rats and mice underneath that plastic. It was an absolute breeding ground for snakes because they just loved it, the food was on tap."



"Our welfare and our staffs' welfare having snakes hanging around - it's not something that would be ideal."

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Rodenticides

"Rats prefer to chew what they're not supposed to chew [rather] than the bait."



"Baits are only ever any good while you've got bait out."

'When you poison rodents, they'd go and die somewhere. You couldn't get them and then you smell a stink. Then you had maggots crawling everywhere, which is not good in a dairy.'



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Rodenticides





"Well, we don't like the baits around because of our dogs and little children. I've got a young, young one [child] with us, and he's with us at the dairy all the time, and we would rather just have the cats than the bait."

"Baiting's not great for the other wildlife, and we've got dogs and I'd prefer not to use the baits."





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Cats: *Value of Cats to Farmers*

'There was rats and mice here for 50 years, but [after we got cats] if we went searching on our farm now to try and find a mouse, I don't believe we'd find one.'



' Yeah, we haven't used rodent baits for probably 4 years now, since we've had cats"

' The cats are cheaper than an electrician bill' & 'cheaper than baits "

' Cats work 24/7, 365 days of the year'



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Cats: *Monetary Value -Reduced repair costs*

"The benefits of not having any breakdowns in our electricals. We haven't had a breakdown in **7 years** since the cats turned up. On its own, it's worth thousands, plus no downtime with the milking machines out of action."



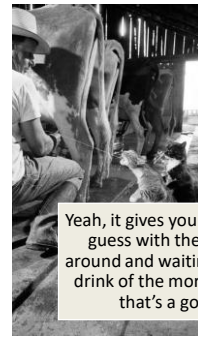




' We haven't had another machine eaten [by mice] since the cats have been here"

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Farmer Wellbeing

I enjoy having [the cats] around. When you get here at three o'clock in the morning, you're on your own, we talk to them. They're company, I guess



Yeah, it gives you a bit of a buzz, I guess with them all waiting around and waiting for their little drink of the morning and yeah, that's a good thing.

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Cats: *Welfare before Desexing*

Farms averaged 44 cats before desexing program (range 3–175)
If > 50 cats, often poor welfare & excess of needs



'Every time a cat was on heat though, they would mate and all the boys would fight.

'Oh, you feel shit when you look at a sick cat. It's like, oh, like your mood changes when you see a sick animal.



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Management (Lethal): *Farmer wellbeing*

'Euthanising the kittens as soon as we found them. … early, before their eyes were open.'





You don't think about it too much because you don't want to.'

'Then you put it off for the next day, and the next day.'

'The shooting part was pretty stressful on the cat & on me. Because you'd have to trap them, and you'd have to settle them down in the trap, and pull the trigger.'

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Management by desexing





- 392 cats desexed – for free
- **Returned - 52%**
- **Rehomed unwanted kittens - 22%**
- **Euthanised - 26%**

Sick or injured cats & cats in excess to needs humanely euthanized (100 cats)
  – For welfare reasons – sick/injured (64%)
  – Due to excess numbers (36%)

- Association between the initial cat population: Total number & percent euthanized ($p \leq 0.001$) & separately for cats euthanized for welfare reasons & for excess cats

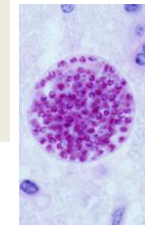
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Benefits of desexing: *for Wildlife & Environment*

- Mature cats are likely immune so not shedding
- Cats under 1 year shed most toxoplasma oocysts
- Provision of food reduces hunting pressure & need to ingest prey to meet energy needs
- Desexing & feeding break toxo cycle & decreases wildlife predation



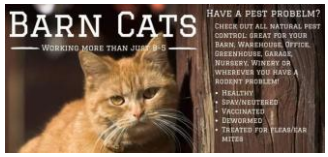




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Farmers' concerns about future

- Now that they're all desexed and there's no replacement plan going on, what am I going do when these cats eventually pass away?' We won't have a cat. We'll have to go & buy some, or something.'
- 'I think everybody should participate in the [cat desexing] program, but there should be some measure whereby we can replace these cats without huge expense of getting them at $800 a cat.'



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Farmers' views on Barn Cat Program

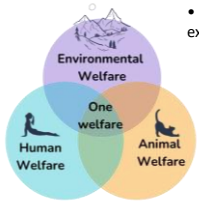
'I reckon that's a great idea because when we were looking for cats, we were struggling to find the first couple of cats that we needed. For a program to be out there where the farmers can take these ready-made cats that are desexed, vaccinated & everything's been done for them, and they're ready to go into a working program. I think that's a great idea to save euthanising the cats.'





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One Welfare Perspective



- Wellbeing benefits of desexed working cats extend to:
  - Farmers (wellbeing, economic - saves machinery breakdowns, rodenticide costs)
  - Cows (feed safety – rodents controlled, no poisoned rats in feed)
  - Cats (if desexed, fed)
  - Wildlife (less poisoning, fewer uncontrolled cats)
  - Veterinarians

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Barriers to Care

- Costs of desexing, vaccination, parasite control, cat food
- Farmers prioritise dairy and 'putting milk in the vat" over cat care
- 'When you've got 20 cats at $250 a cat, you just can't justify it.'

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Farmers' Views on Tax Deductibility

"When we do our food safety audit, if you put baits out, you have to tell them when & where you put baits out – blah, blah, blah - but we literally write, we have cats, they're our vermin control. That's all we have to state and that classes for our food safe handling. So, what's the difference really?'



Australian Government
Australian Taxation Office

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Farmers' Views on Tax Deductibility

- Farmers strongly supported classing cats as working animals & being tax deductible
- ''Poisons are a tax deduction, so why can't the cats be?'
- Comparable to working dogs and horses
- 'Our cats more important than some working dogs.'



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Farmers' Arguments on Tax Deductibility

Farmers need cats. If you're classed as a primary producer, you should have the full right to be able to claim the cats as deductions.



Australian Government
Australian Taxation Office

They're dead set working cats, the saving on repairs, the saving on baiting and yeah, the cats are doing their job, they're basically working for me

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Limitations

- Small sample (15 farmers, 9 farms)
- Regional (QLD, NSW)
- Self-reported; more quantitative evidence needed



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Conclusions

- Cats are vital working animals on dairy farms
- Provide rodent control, cost savings and companionship.
- Desexing improves welfare & environmental outcomes
- Policy reform needed (tax + welfare incentives)
- Opportunities for Barn Cat programs



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Advocate for funding for desexing programs to reduce cats to manageable numbers

Please advocate for farm cats to be tax deductible!

Advocate for funding for further research



• Acknowledgements: farmers, APWF partners, AWL NSW

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Controversial!

Professor in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation:

"Promoting free-roaming cats on farming properties is highly irresponsible and entirely unnecessary"

" I respectfully ask that you reflect deeply on the risks associated with ideas your work is seeking to promote. "

" Please consider the damage your public messaging is doing to wildlife, ecosystems, cat health and welfare, and people"

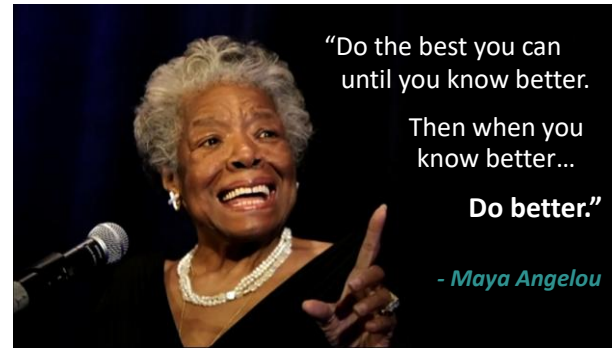
"Better management of factors favouring rodents (e.g. food, environment etc.) and prioritising healthy native predator (rodent-eating) populations (many that are killed by cats) is a far better, ethical and sustainable way to go."

"Cats will never be an effective long-term control/eradication tool for rodent populations, they simply can't eat enough of them"



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