NSW Government initiatives to assist local councils manage pet overpopulation in their communities

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The Division of Local Government

Department of Premier and Cabinet

- Provides the legislative and policy framework within which NSW local councils exercise their companion animals management functions, primarily by way of the *Companion Animals Act 1998*.

- Has implemented a number of measures to help councils reduce euthanasia rates, encourage desexing and limit pet overpopulation in their local communities.

Legislative context

- Since July 1999, the microchipping of companion animals has been compulsory in NSW under the Act and Companion Animals Regulation 2008.

- Local councils are the primary enforcement body and the key point of contact for members of the public with regard to companion animals issues.

Identification and registration

- Two stage process:
    1. permanent identification (or microchipping) from 12 weeks of age, at point of sale or change of ownership (whichever occurs first), and
    2. lifetime registration from 6 months of age.

- Forms the cornerstone of NSW's actions to limit pet overpopulation.

- Evidence suggests this system has increased the rate of desexing and contributed to a downward trend in the euthanasia rate.

Compulsory identification

- Widely accepted as providing the most effective mechanism to reunite lost animals with their owners.

- A 2008 Regulatory Impact Statement found that *"...given the large numbers of stray animals each year and the high proportion that are reunited with their owners by means of the microchip, [the cost of microchipping] is considered to be outweighed by the benefits"* (Groenhout, 2008).

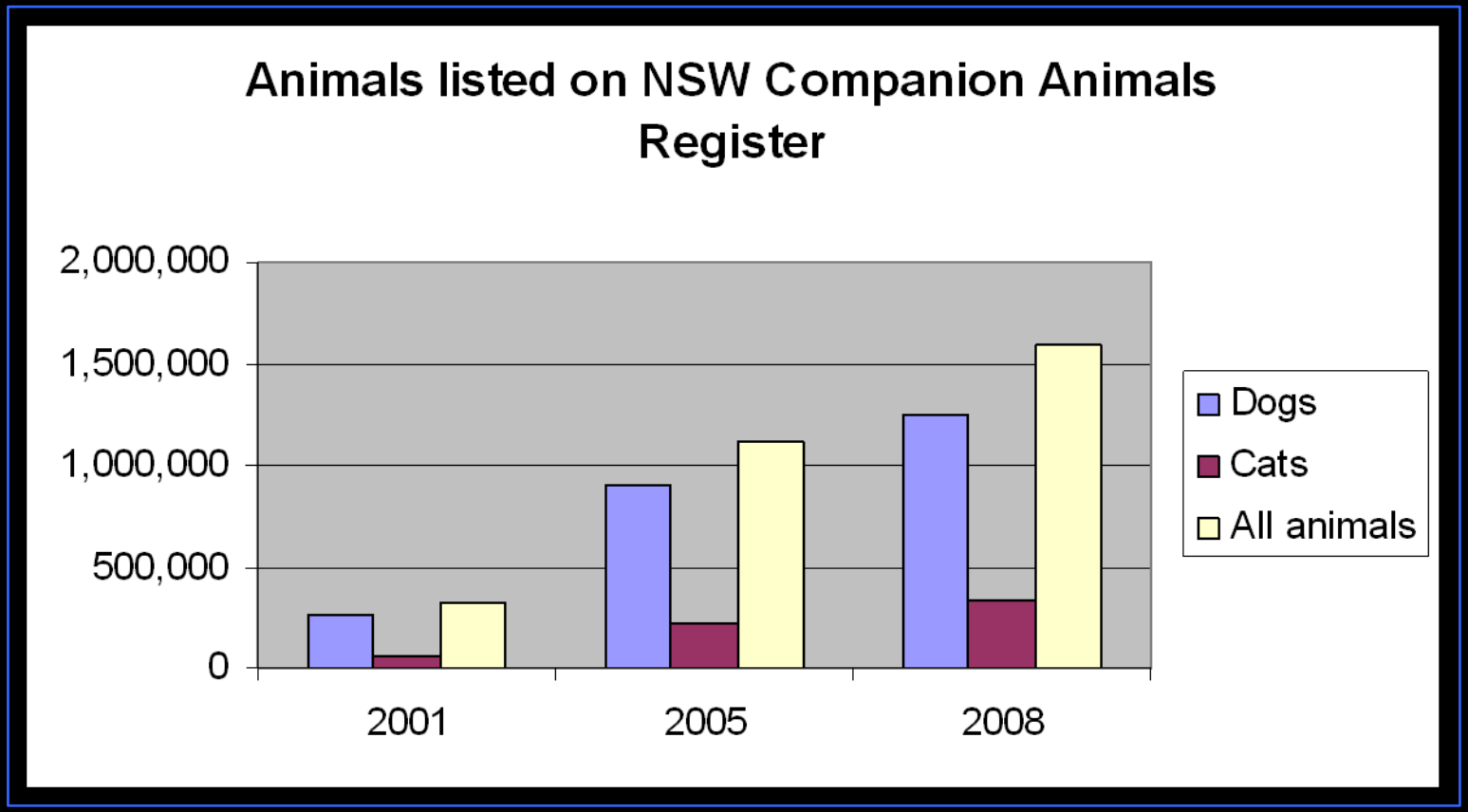
Measuring the effectiveness of compulsory identification

- There is no definitive way to do this, but there are two used by the NSW Government:

    1. by looking at the number of animals on the Companion Animals Register and

    2. by looking at trends arising from council pound data.

Compulsory identification



Animals listed on the Companion Animals Register

	2001	2005	2008	*% change 01 - 08*
Dogs	263,365	891,772	1,252,415	*376%*
Cats	56,220	224,155	335,661	*497%*
All animals	**319,585**	**1,115,927**	**1,588,076**	***396%***

- Increases can be attributed to greater awareness of the benefits of microchipping, achieved through public education, positive media coverage and active enforcement by councils.

- Due to the unwillingness of some members of the community to comply and the limited resources available to councils, a large number of companion animals remain unmicrochipped.

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Measuring the effectiveness of compulsory identification – Pound data

- The Division distributes an annual survey to all NSW councils to collect pound data.
- The survey records the number of animals entering pounds as well as how and why they end up there.
- It also records the outcomes for those animals such as return to owner, sale, rehoming and euthanasia.

Pound data

Outcomes for animals seized by councils

- A preliminary analysis of 2005/06 – 2007/08 pound data indicates that:

  - animals seized by councils are most likely to be taken to the pound.

  - The number of dogs being returned to their owners instead of being impounded appears to have increased by a small amount.

  - Unfortunately, the pre-pound return rate for cats appears to have stayed constantly low over the period.

Pound data

Outcomes for animals in pounds:

- 2005/06 – 2007/08 pound data appears to indicate that:
  - the percentage of impounded dogs returned to their owners has increased by a small amount.
  - the percentage of impounded cats returned to their owners has increased only marginally, from a very low base.
  - there was a significant fall in the euthanasia rate for dogs and small increases in the number of dogs being sold and released to organisations for rehoming.
  - the euthanasia rate for cats has dropped only slightly, from a high base.

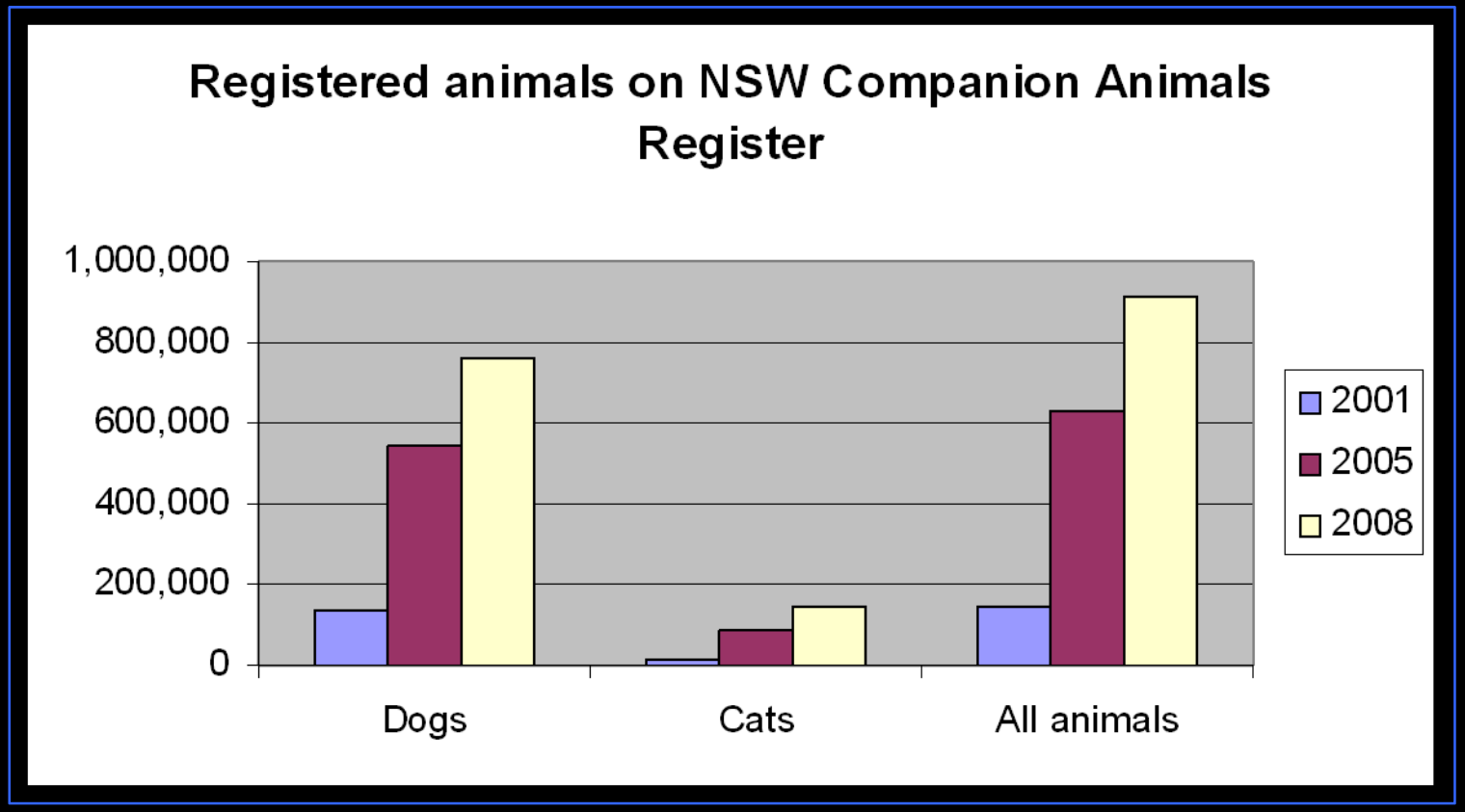
- Highlights the need to do more to reduce the number of cats that are euthanased.

Compulsory lifetime registration

• The second stage of the NSW companion animal registration process is the payment of a compulsory lifetime registration fee for all cats and dogs from 6 months of age.

• A number of exemptions exist including for certain working dogs, greyhounds, police dogs and for animals in the care of approved animal rehoming organisations.

Compulsory lifetime registration



Registered animals on the Companion Animals Register

	2001	2005	2008	*Change in % of animals registered 01 - 08*
Dogs	135,241 (51%)	546,098 (61%)	763,808 (61%)	*10%*
Cats	13,206 (23%)	85,714 (38%)	147,096 (44%)	*21%*
All animals	**148,447 (46%)**	**631,812 (56%)**	**910,904 (57%)**	***11%***

• While registration is on the rise, there are still a significant number of animals in the community who are microchipped but not registered.

• This also means there is a large, untapped pool of funding available to councils and the Government for companion animals management programs.

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Funding for councils

Registration fees fund council companion animal operations and activities

- Any money paid to councils from the Companion Animals Fund must be applied only for companion animals management purposes.
- Provides a constant stream of income to councils for companion animals activities but also acts as an incentive for councils to enforce the legislation.
- Many councils use these funds to educate the community about responsible pet ownership practices, often in conjunction with animal welfare organisations.

Encouraging responsible pet ownership

Registration fees reinforce the concept that ownership of animals is associated with responsibility and the fee reflects that this responsibility is to be taken seriously.

- Registration fees are set at such a level to reinforce the concept of responsible pet ownership, but are not so high as to discourage ownership entirely.

- The lifetime registration fees are currently:
  - $15 for an animal owned by a pensioner (animal must be desexed)
  - $40 for an animal owned by a recognised breeder
  - $40 for a desexed animal
  - $150 for an undesexed animal.

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Desexed animals

The variation of $90 in the registration fee provides a strong incentive for owners to have their companion animals desexed.

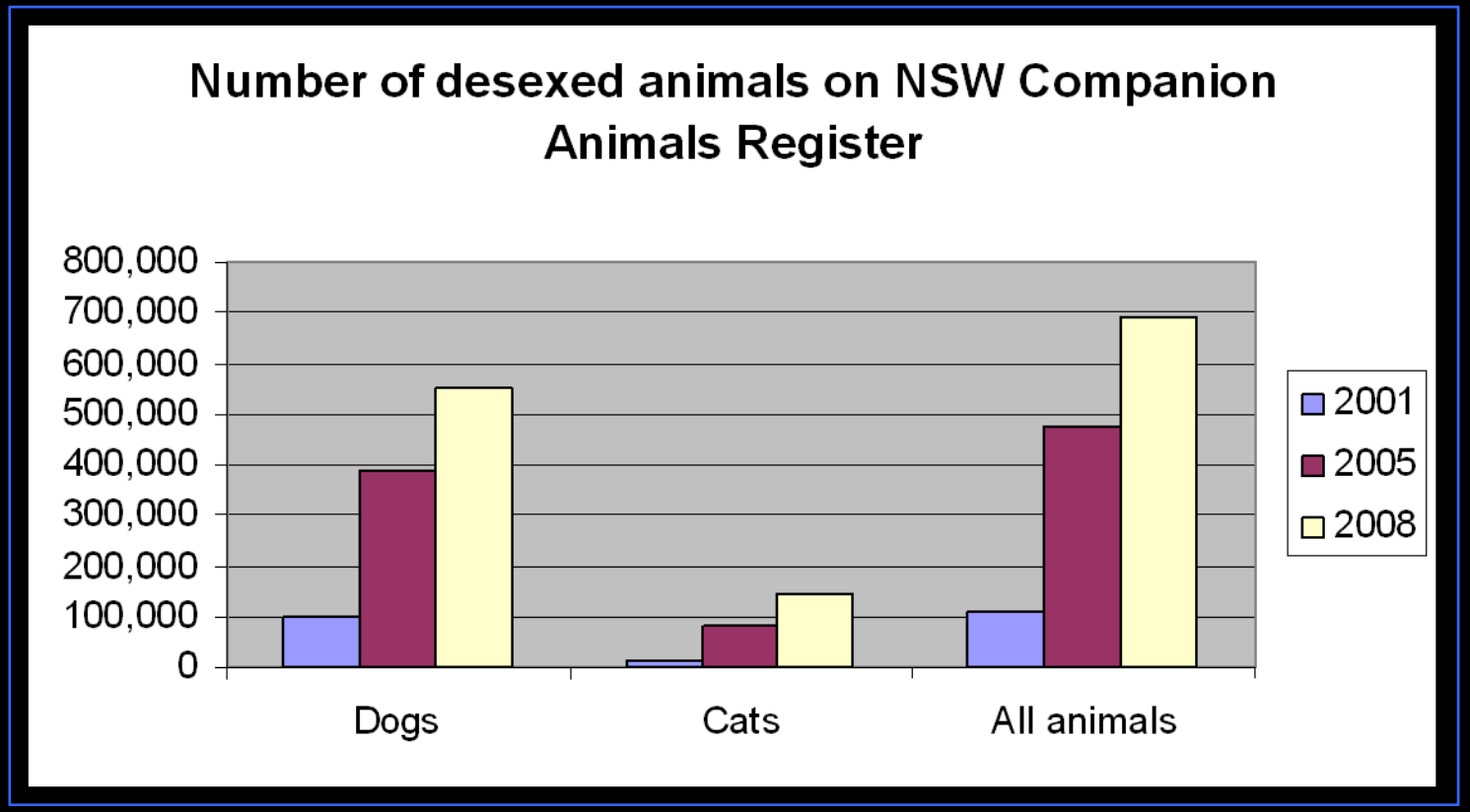
- Compulsory desexing was considered in the 2004 Act review but was not supported.

- Providing incentives for owners to desex their animals is considered a more effective response.

- A significantly discounted lifetime registration fee of $40 for desexed animals, compared to $150 for undesexed animals.

- Several councils have arrangements with local vets and animal welfare organisations to provide low cost desexing of animals sold from council pounds.

Desexed animals



Desexed animals

	2001	2005	2008	*Change in % of animals desexed 01 - 08*
Dogs	99,534 (38%)	390,719 (44%)	548,176 (44%)	*6%*
Cats	12,936 (23%)	83,795 (37%)	143,795 (43%)	*20%*
All animals	**112,470 (35%)**	**474,514 (43%)**	**691,971 (44%)**	***9%***

- Since 2005, almost half of the animals on the Register have been desexed, which indicates that scaled registration fees are working.
- A major contributor to pet overpopulation continues to be unidentified animals that are undesexed, in particular cats.

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Education

Registration fees fund State Government education initiatives.

- Community education has been a central component of the NSW companion animals legislation since its introduction.
- The Division funds various educational initiatives from the Companion Animals Fund including information brochures, posters, a website, and the Register helpdesk.

Safe Pets Out There (SPOT) Program

- A partnership between the former Department of Local Government, the Australian Companion Animals Council, Australian Veterinary Association, RSPCA, Animal Welfare League and Delta Society Australia.

- Has operated since February 2007, teaching children about animal welfare, safety around dogs and responsible pet ownership.

- $600,000 per annum was allocated for a three-year period ending 30 September 2009.

- A new three year companion animals education program targeting children from Kindergarten to Year 2 is expected to commence at the start of the 2010 school year.

Companion Animals Register

Registration fees fund the Companion Animals Register.

- Records the details of all microchipped dogs and cats but is also a companion animals management tool for councils.
- Access to the Register has been provided to Approved Persons to streamline the process of returning seized, lost and injured animals to their owners.
- Over 900 individuals have been approved in this capacity since June 2007.

Exemptions for rehoming organisations

Lifetime registration fee exemptions promote the rehoming of animals

- An exemption from registration has been provided to approved animal rescue organisations for animals in their temporary care for the purposes of re-housing.
- Provides financial relief to approved organisations and an incentive for them to continue their work.
- Organisations must comply with guidelines and their activities are monitored by the Division.

Other initiatives to limit pet overpopulation

- Councils are obliged to consider and undertake alternative action to destroying animals surrendered to the council, where practicable.
- Some councils have adopted local policies which require animals to be desexed before being rehomed.
- To prevent animal hoarding, councils also have powers to issue an order to the occupier of a property restricting the number of animals that can be kept there.

Options for consideration

- The Division of Local Government is currently preparing an issues paper which will consider strategies to better manage pet overpopulation.

- The outcomes of the 3rd National Summit to End Companion Animals Overpopulation will also be considered.

Conclusions

- Some positive developments, but outcomes for dogs appear to have been better than those for cats.
- The issue of how to manage undesexed cats and dogs in the unidentified companion animal population continues to be a key concern for policy-makers.
- It appears that, while compulsory microchipping has been a successful method for reuniting animals with their owners, there is still more to be done to reduce the number of unwanted animals in NSW.