

Declared Animal Policy
under the Natural Resources Management Act 2004



Government
of South Australia

Feral goats (*Capra hircus*)

1. POLICY OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 To protect the environment from damage caused by feral and escaped domestic goats;
- 1.2 To protect primary producers from other hazards occasioned by feral and escaped domestic goats;
- 1.3 To ensure that redomesticated feral goats are properly confined and do not escape; and
- 1.4 To minimise the cost to the domestic goat industry of implementing the above objectives.

2. IMPLEMENTATION

2.1 Control of feral goats

Landholders are responsible for the satisfactory control of the numbers of feral goats on their properties.

2.2 Reduction of the number of released or escaped domestic goats

It is an offence to release goats into the wild. A reduction of the risk that domestic goats will be released or will escape and

- (a) establish new feral goat colonies or augment existing colonies or
- (b) damage property or cause other losses, has been obtained as follows.

In especially environmentally sensitive areas, the keeping of domestic goats is restricted or prohibited without a permit. In particular:

- (a) On most **offshore islands**, the keeping of domestic goats is prohibited without a permit, and
- (b) In the **Flinders Ranges**, the keeping of domestic goats is restricted, and a permit from the SA Arid Lands NRM Board must be obtained before domestic goats are kept.

In other areas, goat owners must not release goats or allow them to escape. Goat owners must:

- (a) permanently identify their goats, and tether or confine them within goat proof fencing; and
- (b) obtain a permit from the Regional NRM Board before redomesticated feral goats are held on a property.

Regional NRM Boards will:

- (a) impose penalties on goat owners who allow domestic goats to stray; and
- (b) recover from the goat owner the cost of recapturing or destroying released or escaped domestic goats when it can be proven that the release was due to a wilful or negligent act.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Introduction

Many goat products are useful, and domestic goats have a place in Australian primary production. But it is also recognised that domestic goats have demonstrated the capacity to escape readily, to survive and breed in the wild, to contribute to environmental degradation, and to have given rise to a feral population that dwarfs its origins. In Australia in 1993 there were about 240 000 domestic goats, but 2–3 000 000 feral goats¹. So long as domestic goats are kept, escaped and deliberately released goats will colonise new habitats, reinfest areas from which goats have been eradicated, and augment existing feral goat populations, to the dismay and inconvenience of some sections of society.

Proper management can ensure both that domestic goats do not escape and that feral goats are eliminated or controlled, but conflicts arise concerning the extent of the resources the respective interested parties should employ to minimise or resolve difficulties. On the goat producer's side, the major issues are the standard of fencing to be used and the steps to be taken to recover escapees. Clearly if goat owners lessen their efforts a greater burden will be imposed on other landholders. For landholders (both government and private) with feral goats on their properties, the major issue is to what level they should reduce feral goat numbers in order to minimise environmental damage and other hazards, but the landholders also have a responsibility to one another because feral goats ignore property boundaries. Mustering for sale can sometimes profitably reduce goat numbers. However, an NRM Board may expect a higher level of control than is achievable by commercial mustering alone, and goat numbers must be reduced to levels judged satisfactory by the NRM Board (see Section 4.1).

Other interested parties include nature conservation bodies, animal health authorities and domestic goat industry bodies. Conservationists (among others) maintain that feral goats cause or contribute to overgrazing, especially in pastoral areas, and are unacceptable in areas dedicated to conserve native flora and fauna. Animal health authorities regard any feral animal as a potential impediment to exotic disease control. The angora and cashmere goat industries have extensively used selected redomesticated feral goats for foundation stock in upgrading or breeding programs. Although this use has declined, feral goats nevertheless remain a genetic resource whose value might again increase.

3.2 Reproductive rates

A population of feral goats can increase by 60 — 75% a year in the absence of control by people, or several-fold over three to four years. Although this is rapid compared with most other domestic ruminants, goats do not erupt in the same way as many pest animals. Rabbits and mice can increase several-fold inside a year, and under favourable conditions can jump from insignificant levels to plague proportions much more rapidly than goats.

3.3 Effects on the environment

The severe damage that goats, often in association with other herbivores, have caused in some areas overseas is usually associated with high overall stock densities and mismanagement. We are not aware of any documented cases which establish that feral goats, in the absence of significant populations of other herbivores, have severely damaged large areas of Australia; undocumented cases might exist. Heavy goat damage is usually highly localised, being restricted, for example, to goat campsites. Some broad areas occupied by feral goats have been overgrazed but, in general, feral goats are outnumbered by sheep and are a lesser component of the

¹ For domestic goats the data are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (who provide a minimum estimate because they do not survey small enterprises), and for feral goats mainly from aerial surveys in the States they occupy.

excessive grazing pressure. Nevertheless, their distinctive impact is readily apparent in most of these areas, and consists of broken branches and a browse line 1.8 metres high on palatable shrubs and trees. Other effects of goat grazing are not readily distinguished from those of sheep.

Unless heavily grazed, arid zone trees and shrubs usually survive droughts, and thereby contribute disproportionately to soil stability wherever they occur. However, once destroyed by overgrazing they are very difficult to replace. Goats have an appetite for, and the ability effectively to utilise, many trees and shrubs not available or not palatable to sheep and cattle, and therefore they can be the more damaging to arid zone perennial vegetation and soil stability. This potential is most likely to be realised during drought, when goats in the arid zone have a reputation for being good survivors. Clearly, goats require careful management to avoid irreversible damage to the vegetation. Feral goats pose a greater threat to arid zone vegetation than do domestic goats. The fences in pastoral areas do not confine them, and only reducing their numbers can control their grazing. In addition, they will continue to breed during drought, whereas the breeding of domestic goats might be curtailed by their managers.

Feral goats in Australia have not comprised the major part of the total grazing pressure over large areas for extended periods. This is due to the comparatively recent origin of the feral goat problem (within the last 100 years) and to efforts at control undertaken by landholders, not to any incapacity on the goats' part to attain high population densities. Should the control efforts be relaxed for any reason, the resultant rapid increase in feral goat numbers would cause severe environmental damage.

3.4 Potential of goats to become feral

Feral goats have demonstrated a far greater capacity to survive in the wild in South Australia than other domestic ruminants. They are common in the South Australian pastoral zone south of the dog fence, and occur in and around numerous patches of scrub in the higher rainfall (mainly agricultural) areas of South Australia. In 2006, the Kangaroo Island Natural Resources Management Board and Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre commenced the Kangaroo Island Feral Goat Eradication Program, at a cost of approximately \$1.2 million. Reinfestation from poorly managed domestic goat herds is the greatest threat to the long term success of the program.

The number of domestic goats in South Australia has increased in recent years. This has resulted in more escapees and new feral goat colonies (e.g., on north-western Eyre Peninsula, in the Coorong National Park, the Ngarkat Conservation Park, and the Beetaloo Reservoir Catchment Area). Redomesticating captured feral goats have created some domestic flocks, and experience shows that these goats are more likely than others to escape. These trends are expected to continue unless adequate control of domestic goats is instigated.

Goats released north of the South Australian dog fence have not survived, probably because of predation by dingoes.

3.5 Feral goats and exotic animal disease

Goats are susceptible to many exotic animal diseases. Animal health authorities believe that if one of these diseases entered Australia, feral goats could harbor and spread the infection. Attempts to eliminate the disease could be frustrated both by the difficulty of eliminating feral goats to the point where the disease dies out, and because some of the control measures employed might disperse the feral goats and actually spread the outbreak. Clearly it is desirable to remove or reduce feral goat populations in a timely and economical manner before the exotic disease arrives.

4. EXPLANATION AND COMMENTS

4.1 Implementation of obligation to control feral goats

Landholders must control the number of feral goats on their property at an acceptable level, to be determined by the NRM board after consultation with the landholder and other interested parties.

The minimum level of control that the NRM Board expects of landholders is that which it is in the landholder's own interest to obtain. Both the short and long-term benefits of control are considered. The main short-term benefit is increased production from domestic livestock due to reduced competition between them and feral goats for food and possibly water, and the main long-term benefit is increased production and land value due to reduced land degradation. Other benefits to the landholder include reduced damage to fences, and reduced losses in the event of an exotic disease outbreak. In addition, the level of control must be sufficient to reduce to low levels the adverse effects of pests on one property on neighbouring properties.

The pastoralist who controls feral goats only if the mustering operation itself is profitable is clearly not doing enough — the goats that remain cost money, and an even lower number would increase overall profits, with control costs being more than offset by the increased profit made from other activities. By the same token, profits from commercial mustering should be used to effect a still higher level of control (for example by using them to shoot some of the remaining goats, or to facilitate future control operations by building trap yards or strategically placed holding yards), and should lead to an overall higher level of control than if the initial profit had not been made.

If a landholder fails adequately to control feral goats on his property, the NRM board can institute control operations, to be undertaken either by third parties or by its own staff, and recover costs from the landholder.

4.2 Local community involvement

Local-community-driven management of goat control is integral to this policy, and local communities can interpret and implement this goat control policy according to their own circumstances. To facilitate this process many goat control matters have devolved to regional NRM boards. Emphasis can be given to any aspect of control wherever it is of particular concern: for example, controls over domestic goat keeping might be stricter in districts with large tracts of goat-free native vegetation than in those which are extensively cleared, and the local community can determine this through their NRM board. Biosecurity SA will help Boards develop their own policies by providing technical and other support.

4.3 Prohibition of goats from certain areas

Under Section 176 (1a) of the *NRM Act 2004*, the keeping of domestic goats is prohibited in the following areas:

- (a) **Offshore islands.** Note: the exception to this prohibition is Wardang Island

(b) **Flinders Ranges.** Feral goats occur throughout most of the north Flinders Ranges, and have long been a cause for concern. In the long term, it is desirable to eradicate these goats. Any such program will be very expensive, and the under the policy has an objective to reduce the risk of reinfestation to an absolute minimum. Because there will inevitably be some escapes from a domestic goat enterprise, especially in rough terrain, the keeping of domestic goats in the Flinders Ranges Planning Area has been prohibited. A permit to keep goats will be issued both to anyone needing to keep goats for medical reasons, and to landholders in the Flinders Ranges Planning Area who owned domestic goats before 1 July 1987, subject to compliance with identification and fencing requirements.

4.4 Keeping domestic goats

People keeping domestic goats must tether them securely or keep them inside goat-proof fences. There are no special fencing requirements for other domestic stock, but the prevalence of feral goats compared with other feral ruminants is clear evidence that goats escape readily, multiply rapidly, and are difficult to eradicate.

The design of goat fences is an area of innovation and experimentation, and Biosecurity SA and NRM boards do not seek to inhibit useful developments. The establishment of a minimum fencing standard would inhibit innovation. Furthermore, the standard of fence required will vary with the breed of goat and with the quality of their management. A fencing standard has to cater for the worst possible combination of circumstances, and would impose an excessively expensive fence on the majority of goat owners, whose animals pose little or no threat. However, the Chief NRM Officer under the NRM Act has the capacity to determine a standard for goat fencing under the NRM Regulations. The essence of the fence is that it is goat-proof, and the landholder is in the best position to know his land and animals and to build and maintain a suitable fence.

An NRM Board however reserves the right to require a landholder to upgrade his fence if, in the opinion of the board, it is inadequate. This provision will probably only be employed if a fence is poorly maintained or is of an orthodox but substandard design. The New South Wales Agriculture recommendations for boundary fences give a guide to the minimum standard that should be maintained — briefly, they recommend either a six line electric fence or a fence based on 8/90/30 prefabricated fencing for large goat breeds; a lesser fence appears to be adequate for angora goats. (For more details see Lund, R. & May, T. 1990. *Goat Fencing*. NSW Agriculture Agfact A7.2.1.) Electric fencing is unacceptable in situations where it is unlikely to be adequately maintained (e.g., unmanned properties). It will be allowed in the pastoral zone provided adequate testing facilities are included in the design and the property is permanently manned.

On Kangaroo Island the keeping of goats is prohibited without a permit. Permits may be issued by the KI NRM Board under s188 of the NRM Act that will enable existing goat owners to maintain their animals, subject to a range of conditions relating to identification, possession, containment and movement specified in the permit. Goat owners will need to apply for a permit from the KI NRM board. The board will undertake a risk assessment and approve specific conditions relating to identification, possession, containment and movement of goats on a case by case basis, based on the risk of escape and likelihood of recovery of any escaped animals (i.e. goat farms in proximity to native vegetation and unsuitable topography will require higher standards of fencing).

Special provisions apply in the case of properties on which recently recaptured or redomesticated feral goats are held. See Section 4.9.

4.5 Identification

Domestic goats over 6 months of age or 15 kg body weight must carry a tattoo, earmark and/or brand so a domestic goat escapee can be traced back to its property of origin. Please contact the NRM board for further details.

Because it is impracticable to change the identification mark every time a goat is sold, records maintained by goat owners will be used to trace the last recorded owner of an escaped goat. Unless the NRM board determines otherwise, the identification requirement will be waived if up to three wether goats are the only domestic goats on the property.

4.6 Recovery of escapees

In recent years goats have escaped from properties with inadequate fencing and colonised large areas of scrub. To the best of our knowledge, the owners made little or no effort to recover these escapees. The *NRM Act 2004* provides for a penalty over and above the possible loss of the goats to be imposed on landholders who wilfully or negligently allow goats to stray. In addition, the cost of recapturing or destroying escaped domestic goats may be recoverable from the owner where this can be proven.

4.7 Protection against indiscriminate slaughter of escaped goats

Goat owners are afforded a measure of protection against the destruction of escaped goats. A landholder onto whose land goats have strayed must, before he disposes of them and if he believes or has reason to believe that the goats belong to someone else, take steps to notify the owner and give him a reasonable amount of time to remove the goats. Consult your local NRM board for more details.

4.8 Releasing captured feral goats is illegal

Mustered feral goats are sometimes released back into the wild if they are too small in size or number for their sale to be profitable. The landholder might reason that they will grow and be worth more later on, or that their numbers will increase through reproduction or immigration. It is illegal to release captured feral goats back into the wild. All captured feral goats must be either destroyed on the property, or disposed of for slaughter, destruction, or redomestication elsewhere. Under this policy, captured feral goats to be held on their property of origin for no more than 14 days to give the landholder an opportunity to capture more to make up a truckload. See also Section 4.9.

4.9 Holding and re-domestication of feral goats

If not properly handled, recently captured feral goats are more likely to escape than others. The facilities used to contain them are therefore be subject to inspection and approval by the NRM board.

Captured feral goats can be held on the property on which they were mustered for no more than six weeks (14 days should suffice in most cases). Unless determined otherwise by the NRM Board, no inspection or approval of the facilities used to hold them there is required. They may then be transported:

- (a) to a property on which feral goats which have not been permanently identified in a manner approved by the Chief NRM Officer are held prior to slaughter or transportation elsewhere. A permit obtained from the Commission is needed before such unidentified goats are held on a property. Or;
- (b) to a property on which they are to be redomesticated. Any such goat which has not been permanently identified in a manner approved by the Chief NRM Officer must be so identified immediately it is taken off the transporting vehicle. Any goats which have not been held in captivity for at least three months after leaving the property on which they were captured must not be held on a property unless a permit to do so has been obtained from the NRM board.

Feral goats policy

The board will not tolerate the overgrazing of areas of native vegetation, or the use of lopped or felled native vegetation, to feed captured feral goats. Goats held in facilities where plant growth is insufficient must be removed immediately, destroyed, or given supplementary feed.

Hon Ian Hunter MP Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation Date: 26th of March 2015