



# Euthanasia or Humane Destruction of Stray Cats

**For members of the public who wish to seek advice on what to do with a stray cat, please refer to the [SPCA Guidelines](#)**

## Position Statement

Members of the public regularly present New Zealand veterinarians with stray cats for euthanasia or humane destruction. Faced with this situation, veterinarians need to proceed carefully with a detailed understanding of the complex decision-making required that is based on:

1. legal and ethical requirements;
2. welfare implications for the stray cat;
3. welfare implications for those providing care for stray cats; and
4. welfare implications for the veterinary team.

These considerations are often not well understood or acknowledged by the person or people presenting the cat, who may not be aware that veterinarians are not legally required to accept stray cats into their care, neither are they obligated to agree to euthanase or humanely destroy healthy stray cats.

Guidance contained within this position statement is intended to provide further information for the public around veterinary considerations when faced with an unowned stray cat.

Veterinarians advocate for and promote optimal health and welfare of animals and encourage responsible pet ownership. The NZVA supports appropriate euthanasia or humane destruction with consideration for the below sections.

## Practical Definitions of Cats

An understanding of the framework used to describe the various parts of the cat population is integral to a veterinarian's knowledge of how to proceed when an unowned (but possibly 'semi-owned') cat is presented to them by a member of the public.

The Animal Welfare (Companion Cats) Code of Welfare 2018 contains a definition of cat categories that is generally accepted in New Zealand today:

### Companion cat

A common domestic cat (including a kitten unless otherwise stated) that lives with humans as a companion and is dependent on humans for its welfare.

### Feral cat

A cat which is not a stray cat, and which has none of its needs provided by humans. Feral cats generally do not live around centres of human habitation. Feral cat population size fluctuates largely independently of humans, is self-sustaining and is not dependent on input from the companion cat population.

### Stray cat

A companion cat which is lost or abandoned, or a cat which is born stray; and which is living as an individual or in a group (colony). Stray cats have many of their needs indirectly supplied by humans and live around centres of human habitation. Stray cats will breed with the unneutered companion and stray cat population.



### **Managed Stray Cat (also “semi-owned”)**

This category of cat is defined in the National Cat Management Strategy document as cats that are fed or cared for often or always for at least one month by a person or caregiver who does not perceive ownership for the cat. Managed stray cats may live in a group otherwise known as a colony.

Based on these definitions, unowned cats with which veterinarians deal with can be divided into two meaningful categories. Those that are either managed by people, or not:

1. **Socialised or tame stray cats** – can be handled, may be managed or have a guardian that considers that they have some relationship with, and responsibility to, the cat. These cats may appear unsocialised in the first instance when confined, but may settle to varying degrees, given time.
2. **Unsocialised stray cats** – cannot be handled, **BUT** may be managed, or have a guardian that considers that they have some relationship with, and responsibility to, the cat. These cats will likely display fearful, ‘wildtype’ behaviour (i.e. hissing, spitting, batting) when confined and even with time will continue to show fearful, protective or aggressive behaviour.

### **Actions When a Cat is Presented to a Veterinary Clinic**

The NZVA [position statement on responsible companion cat ownership](#) recommends permanent identification including microchipping and registration on the New Zealand Companion Animal Register (NZCAR) for all companion cats.

Where a companion cat is presented to a clinic as a presumed unowned cat, it should be scanned for a microchip. If a microchip is present, the number should be searched against the NZCAR to identify the registered guardian. (Note that a cat ‘owner’ may not necessarily be the NZCAR ‘guardian’)

It is extremely unlikely that a truly **feral cat** (by definition) will be presented to a veterinary clinic by a member of the public. Even when a cat is believed to be feral according to the definition in the Code of Welfare, it is still imperative for veterinarians to pursue all practical measures to establish if the cat can be identified by a microchip or any other form of identification before undertaking euthanasia or humane destruction.

### **Welfare implications for the stray cat: “Euthanasia” or “Humane Destruction”**

The NZVA advocates for the euthanasia of cats that are experiencing pain or suffering that cannot be managed or minimised. Where faced with the situation where a cat is severely injured or sick, and no guardian can be found within a reasonable time, veterinarians are required to perform euthanasia to relieve unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress. (Animal Welfare Act 1999, section 138).

Veterinarians have a responsibility to ensure that where euthanasia is necessary, it is carried out with the utmost respect to the patient’s welfare, ensuring that the process is as painless and free from distress as possible. Veterinarians should strive to euthanase an animal within its physical and behavioural comfort zones and, where possible, prepare a calming environment.

As well as welfare compromise from pain or suffering that cannot be managed or minimised, stray cats presented to the veterinary clinic are often fearful and highly reactive. Given time and appropriate human interaction, they may become manageable and responsive. In such cases (**socialised** stray cats), where euthanasia is deemed necessary, it can be performed by the veterinary team in a way that is painless and free from distress – here the term “euthanasia” is appropriate.

The term “humane destruction” is used in place of euthanasia when referring to stray, unmanageable fearful and distressed cats for whom confinement only serves to escalate their distress. This term better acknowledges difficulties in making the cat’s death, where necessary, one that is free of distress. In addition, “humane destruction” may more accurately reflect that the act of destruction, in this situation, is not likely to be performed in the primary interest of the cat.



Relevant NZ legislation (Animal Welfare Act 1999) utilises a single term, “destruction”, as a reflection of the many situations and the variety of animal species the legislation can be applied to.

### **Veterinary considerations required for Euthanasia or Humane Destruction of Stray Cats.**

Where stray cats presented by the public are accepted into the care of veterinary teams, the decision-making process before euthanasia or humane destruction requires due diligence based on a good understanding of relevant legislation (e.g. Animal Welfare Act (1999), the Code of Welfare (Companion Cats) (2018) and the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ) Code of Professional Conduct.

There are significant health and safety risks associated with managing healthy unsocialised strays in the veterinary clinic, in addition to the impact on the unsocialised cat. Other organisations such as the SPCA may need to be involved. There is often a period that the stray cat needs to be held in the clinic before any action can be taken.

Legally, a veterinarian is not required to receive or accept a stray cat in a cage, nor are they obligated to agree to euthanase or humanely destroy cats presented to the clinic by members of the public who have no ownership or authorised agency for these cats. **The exception to this situation is the stray cat that is severely injured or sick** (i.e. experiencing pain or suffering that cannot be managed or minimised)

### **Wider impact of Euthanasia or Humane Destruction of stray cats - veterinary teams and cat caregivers.**

The decision-making process regarding euthanasia or humane destruction of stray cats, even when the primary reason is to **prevent further suffering**, can significantly impact the veterinary team. Veterinarians frequently face tough decisions - navigating their own emotions and ethical considerations, while carefully considering the welfare of the cat. In addition, people providing care for stray cats can be significantly emotionally impacted by the process and the impact on this group should also be considered.