

Compulsory Microchipping in NSW

Maree Garrett, Department of Local Government, NSW

NSW is the first state in Australia to introduce compulsory microchipping for dogs and cats. The legislation which governs microchipping in this state is the Companion Animals Act 1998, and Companion Animals Regulation 1999.

The current Act replaced the Dog Act of 1966 and, when introduced in NSW on 1 July 1999, provided a number of new initiatives:

- for the first time companion animals legislation applied across all of NSW – all councils applying the same legislation,
- for the first time all registration fees were set by the Regulation – no council could charge more, or less,
- for the first time cats were recognised under legislation and councils were given powers to deal with them and,
- for the first time, compulsory microchipping and the need for lifetime registration.

This is a two step process, with identification with a microchip by 12 weeks of age, point of sale, or change of ownership, whichever occurs first. Lifetime registration is required by 6 months of age.

Interestingly enough, the progress of the Companion Animals Act, from its first draft, green and white papers, through to the final bill in Parliament, carries the distinction of being the most widely debated Act ever in the history of the NSW Parliament, with over 10,000 submissions received and over two days of debate, before the bill was eventually passed.

The Companion Animals legislation provides a framework for the identification and registration of companion animals, and for the duties and responsibilities of their owners and councils.

After some six years of operation we are starting to see a trend emerge, and NSW believes compulsory microchipping and lifetime registration has increased the rate of desexing, reduced the number of animals going into shelters, and contributed to a downward trend in the euthanasia rate across NSW.

When NSW first introduced the idea of compulsory microchipping, there was much debate, and we all heard the cries “it will never work” and “it’s nothing but a licence to kill animals”. There were some initial ‘teething problems’ along the way, but NSW was the first to make microchipping compulsory—with all the other States looking on with great interest.

I don’t think there is a person who can dispute the fact that microchipping creates a unique link between animal and owner, with the identification and return of pets to rightful owners made as easy as possible. With compulsory microchipping, enforcement functions are also streamlined with councils and animal welfare organisations able to return animals quickly and easily and take action against those owners whose animals have attacked or caused a nuisance.

Before we get to the ‘facts and figures’, there was an incident in 2005 that really highlights the benefits of microchipping. A cat called Marnie, who lived in Singleton in NSW with her family went missing. This cat was microchipped and registered and her owners listed her on the Register as missing when she disappeared. The Department received a phone call from an interstate veterinary clinic some two weeks after she had disappeared, advising they had a cat with a microchip and asked us to check our database as it wasn’t listed on any of the national databases. Sure enough, it was on our Register and we obtained contact details, but couldn’t get on to her owners.

Messages were left on home and mobile phones, and when there was no return phone call, the secondary contact number was used. It turned out to be the owner’s mother who told us that Marnie the cat, had been missing for about 10 days and her son had been looking everywhere for her. She said her son was on a flight to Brisbane to watch the rugby, and when informed that Marnie was in a vet clinic in Brisbane and had beat her son to Queensland, she just couldn’t believe it!

Needless to say, her son got the surprise of his life when he got off the plane and received our messages. He and his wife jumped in a taxi not really believing it was their cat, and telling us there must have been a microchip mix-up—but sure enough, it was Marnie. To this day, they have absolutely no idea of how she got there, but she flew home with them a few days later.

I think it’s fairly safe to say they would never have got Marnie back if she hadn’t been microchipped. This story is not an isolated case and every day, somewhere in NSW an animal is returned because it is microchipped.

Other states and overseas Governments are recognising the benefits of microchipping. Victoria is set to introduce compulsory microchipping by 2007 and the New Zealand Government has now introduced compulsory microchipping and lifetime registration after seeing the positive outcomes for NSW.

Overseas, France makes it compulsory for a dog or cat to be either tattooed or microchipped and, if you believe the rumours, the United States and Sweden are getting serious about introducing compulsory microchipping. The Department has also advised policy officers in Ireland regarding the NSW experience and, they are also giving the introduction of compulsory microchipping serious consideration.

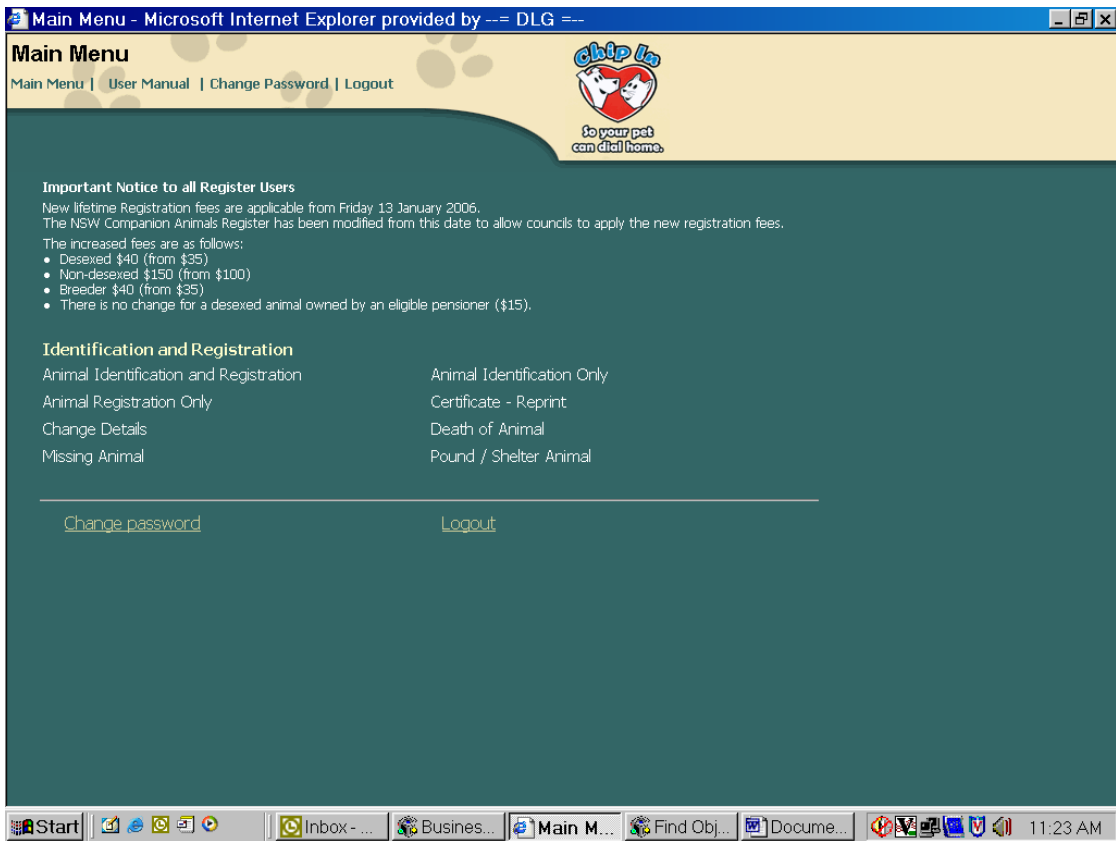
NSW Companion Animals Register (NSWCAR)

The NSW Companion Animals Register is set up within the framework of the legislation. It records all dogs and cats microchipped in NSW. As you are aware, there are private databases which have existed prior to the introduction of our Register, and many animals in NSW continue to be listed there. But under the Act, it is compulsory that all animals microchipped in NSW are listed on the State Government Register.

Along with companion animal information and owner details, the Register also provides a mechanism to record and track the activities of Authorised Identifiers, breed and temperament assessors, nuisance dogs and cats, and importantly, dangerous dogs.

Access to the Register is only for persons authorised by the Director General under the Act with access to information contained on the Register only permitted when exercising functions under the Act. There are different levels of access according to the functions of an authorised person.

The Register provides a menu of options for different functions. A person who is a registration agent or customer service operator for council would be provided with Register access similar to the following:



and a senior officer or manager for a council would have menu access similar to this:



The Register also allows a council to record when an animal has entered or left a pound in NSW. This is a particularly useful when building evidence to support a nuisance order for a dog or cat habitually at large.

Lookup Animal - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by --- DLG ---

Animal Search
[Main Menu](#) | [User Manual](#) | [Change Password](#) | [Logout](#)



Search Details

Animal Details

Animal Status: Home
 Name: Leroy
 Microchip Number: 7777777777777777
 Authorised Identifier number: V0003056
 Date of Implantation: 02 May 2006
 Identification Date: 29 June 2006
 Species: Dog
 Breed: American Staffordshire Terrier / Australian Bulldog cross
 Date of birth: 01 April 2006
 Gender: Male
 Desexed: No
 Colour: Brown
 Identifying marks: Big and Bad
 Additional Comments:
 Out of Date?: No

Address Usually kept

Address: 1 Test st
 Suburb/Town: TEST TOWN
 State: NSW
 Postcode: 2000

Nuisance Animal Details

Order Date	Expiry Date
03 July 2006	03 January 2007

Pound Shelter Details

Arrival Date	Held By	Departure Date	Action
01 July 2006	Blacktown City Council	02 July 2006	Returned to Owner

Owner Details

Title: Rabbi
 Family Name: Cohen
 Given names: Brian
 Home Phone: 44784156164
 Work Phone: 84848646456456
 Mobile Phone:
 Email:

Residential address

Address: 1 Test st
 Suburb/Town: TEST TOWN
 State: NSW

Registration Details

Registration type: 2006 Non Desexed
 Registration Date: 29 June 2006
 Amount paid: \$150
 Registration Receipt number: 435261
 Date Receipt Issued: 05 June 2006
 Receipt Issued By: Auburn Council

Cancel Previous Next Finish

As demonstrated with an example of a Register record above, the Register allows an authorised officer access to information regarding an animal's behavior even when offences have occurred in other local Government areas. For example, when a dog that has been subject to a nuisance or dangerous dog order moves from Strathfield in Sydney, to Byron Bay on the north coast, the officers are able to enter the microchip number into the Register, and obtain all enforcement information relating to those orders.

The Register also provides a mechanism where if an animal goes missing, that information can be entered on the animal record on the Register to alert a user making an enquiry against the microchip number. This is particularly effective when an animal goes missing in one area and enters a pound some distance away from where it was lost. Any pound in NSW has access to this record. Once a record is marking as 'missing', ownership cannot be changed until it is established that the owner no longer owns the animal or has relinquished rights to the animal by not claiming it from a shelter or pound.

The Register has certainly been a valuable tool to assist in the enforcement of the Companion Animals Act. Unfortunately, some six years after its commencement, some councils and users continue to neglect to provide the information as required. I think it's realistic to state that the Register is only as good as the information that is on it and the same goes for microchipping data. If all Guidelines were followed and authorised identifiers and users of the Register adopt the recommended procedures as directed, both the Register and the data contained on it would more accurately reflect the dogs and cats living in NSW. However this is not an issue that is unique to the NSW experience. Many operators of other information databases report the same frustrations.

Dog owners who give away their dogs and neglect to update the details, and breeders who don't let the new owners know the animals are even microchipped, are all part and parcel of running and maintaining a complete and up to date Register. The 152 Local councils in NSW have the duty of assisting pet owners to update information on the Register and needless to say, some do it well, with others needing to improve their work practices in order to raise the standard of data on the Register.

Register enhancements

With the recent Act amendments, the Department has undertaken modifications to the Register to support those changes.

Breed and Temperament assessments are now able to be recorded on the database, and reports providing information regarding pass/fail rates and those assessors conducting assessments are able to be monitored. These reports will enable the Government to examine the provisions of amended legislation both now and into the future.

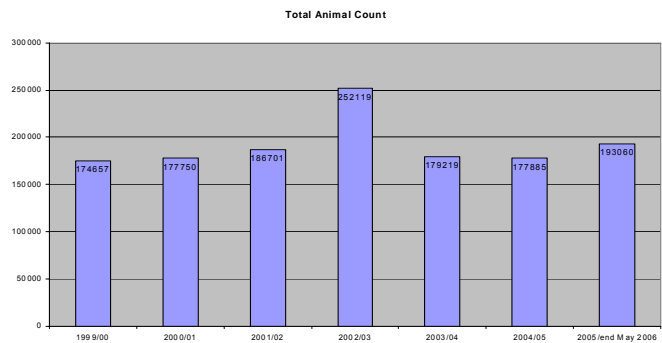
A further recent enhancement to the Register is microchip searching of the Register using WAP enabled technologies. This means if an officer is called out after hours, it can be quickly established, whether the dog is restricted or dangerous and take immediate, appropriate action.

This increased Register access is recognition that immediate and up-to-date data is essential to officers carrying out enforcement functions. While not new technology, it was recognised that remote access to the Register for rangers using portable devices such as Blackberry's, O2's and WAP enabled phones would greatly assist officers in the field.

There is a small pilot project currently underway in several councils to test the efficiency of remote access and it is likely that widespread access will become available shortly afterwards.

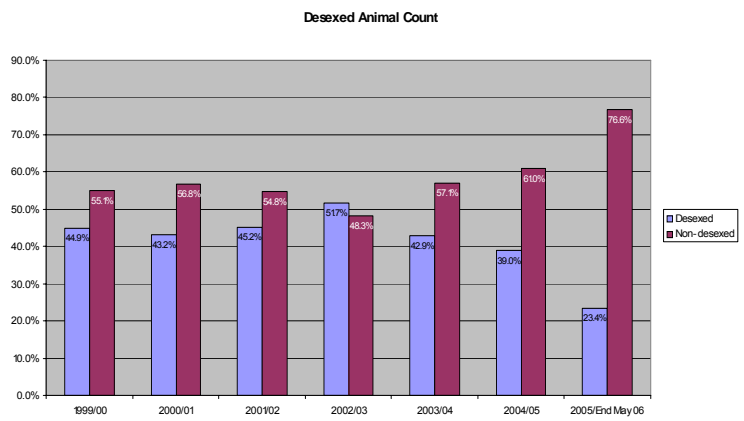
Pets in NSW

Some six years after the establishment of the Register, there have been over 1.3 million animals listed. The following graph shows the number of animals listed on the Register since the 1 July 1999 to the end of May this year.



The 'peak' in 2003 is explained by the end of the transition period from annual registration, to lifetime registration, where all the dogs that were previously on the annual system had to be microchipped and then lifetime registered.

This next graph shows the ratio of desexed and undesexed pets in NSW across the same period.

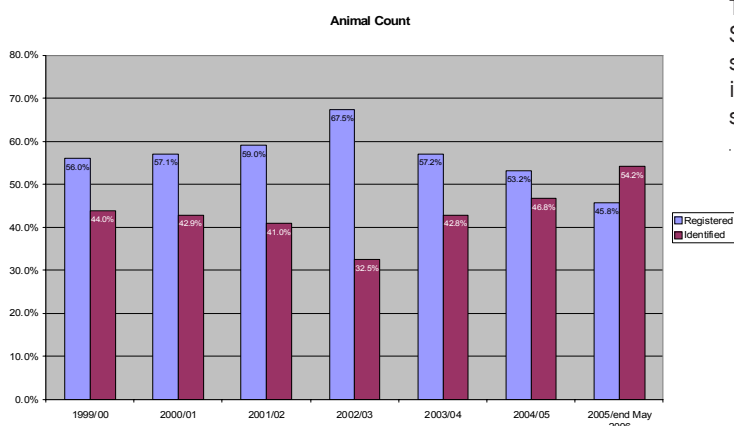


The desexing status is only relevant to the type of registration that is paid, and this is recorded only when an animal is registered. If a pet is not desexed at that time, it is recorded as undesexed, however it may be desexed later on, so the actual figures for desexed animals are more than likely higher than indicated here.

Also included in this data are dogs and cats under the age of six months that will later go on to be desexed either before or after registration.

The following graph shows the ratio of animals that are registered compared to those only identified with a microchip. As you can see, apart from this year, where the data is incomplete, more animals are registered compared to those just identified. This is pleasing considering within the unregistered figures, are many animals that are not yet required to be registered or are exempt from registration.

The cost of lifetime registration is a clear legislative strategy that encourages pet owners to desex their animals.



Registration fees

While most of the registration fees have recently been increased through the Act amendments in January this year, the cost of a pensioner registering a desexed pet has not increased and still remains at only \$15.00. A desexed pet is \$40.00 to register (up from \$35), and the lifetime registration fee for an undesexed dog or cat is now \$150.00 (up from \$100).

If averaged out over the normal lifespan of a pet of say ten to twelve years, it can be as little as two or three dollars a year. The Registration fees for desexed pets remain low, to encourage desexing and subsequent registration.

Statistics

In order to determine the effectiveness of the legislation and policy framework, the Department collects different types of statistics relating to companion animals, including dog attack reports and pound data from councils.

I believe its fair to say that, over the years, reporting has been poor, and, with limited resources to allow for follow up, it has not really improved dramatically over time.

One recent amendment to the Act, that we are particularly pleased about, is the requirement for councils, at the Director General's request, to report on any matter relating to the activities of a council pound operated by the council or the council's agent—and believe me, the Director General will be, and is going to continue requesting that information!

This is seen as a clear strategy to tidy up and improve reporting functions of councils.

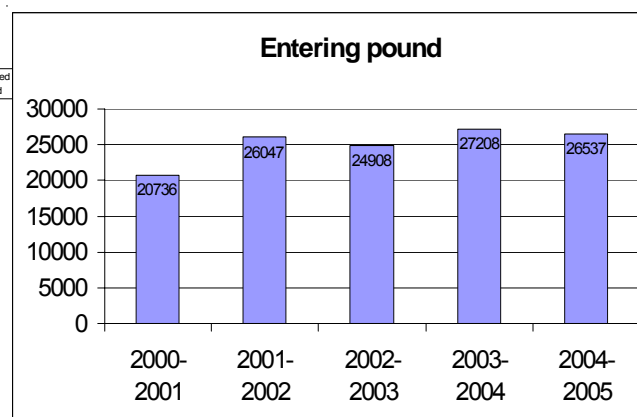
Pound data collection

When the Department first started collecting data, there were 173 NSW councils. With local Government reform and boundary changes high on the agenda recently, the number of councils has been reduced to 152. Therefore, it is very difficult to compare the data from year to year. Not only does the number of councils change each year—so does the number of councils reporting.

I have taken the liberty of selecting a sample of councils from NSW, that have not been affected by amalgamations or boundary changes, and have consistently reported data from 2000 to 2005. These 31 councils represent metropolitan, regional, rural and remote councils.

An online pound data collection form is sent to councils each year. Councils are required to complete and return on a financial year basis. Some councils continue to do this well, while others struggle every year.

This first graph shows the number of animals coming into Shelters. Included in these figures are animals that have been surrendered and dumped by owners, pets that have been handed in by people who have found them wandering, as well as those seized by council enforcement officers.

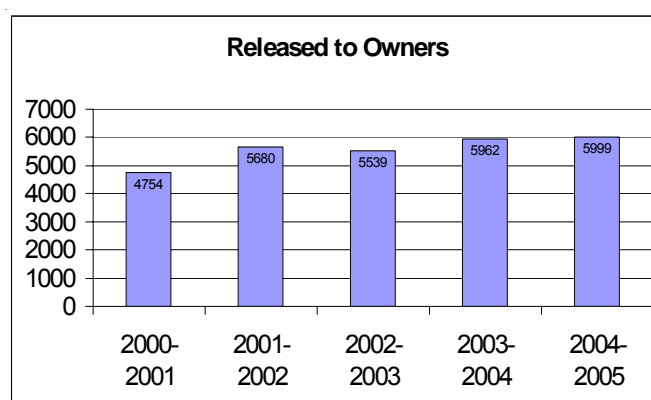


One positive aspect of our legislation is that any animal that is found or seized has the option of being returned home (if the owner can be contacted), taken to an approved animal welfare organisation, or taken to a council pound. Many councils are proactive and return as many pets as possible without impounding them while others believe that any animal that is seized is to be impounded.

As you can see, the number of animals entering this selection of council shelters has not really changed however we are seeing a positive trend at the other end of the equation. We believe that this is due to the community becoming better informed about microchipping and registration and, councils doing a better job in animal management overall by actively promoting leash laws.

This next slide demonstrates this further by showing an increase in the number of animals being returned to their owners because they are microchipped and can be contacted (a pet can always slip a collar and tag) but its pretty hard to slip out of a microchip!

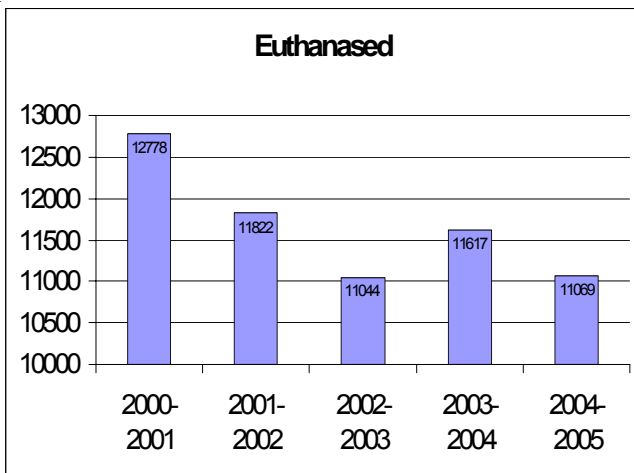
In the 2001-2002 financial year, 23% of pets were reunited with their owners. While the number of animals actually being impounded in 2004-2005 has increased, there is a 26.19% increase in the number of animal being reunited with their owners.



More pet owners are becoming aware of, not only the requirement to have animals microchipped and registered, but of the importance of keeping information details updated on the Register and, dare I say it, more people are becoming responsible pet owners.

Section 64 of the Companion Animals Act provides that if an animal is unclaimed the council may sell or destroy the animal, **but** it is the duty of the council to look at alternatives to euthanasia and if possible, adopt those alternatives.

This graph will show you correspondingly, a decrease in the euthanasia rate over these five years. In the financial year 2000-2001, 61% or 12,778 of these of animals that came into these pounds were euthanased. By the end of the 2005 collection period, the percentage of animals being euthanased had dropped to 41%.

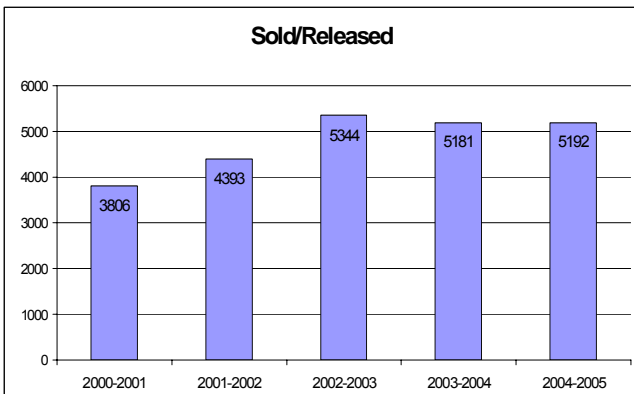


It is still an unacceptable number of animals being euthanased, and when you consider this snapshot represents only 20% of all NSW councils, and does not include euthanasia figures from organisations such as the Animal Welfare League or the RSPCA, its truly sad to think about how many animals are killed each year.

This final graph demonstrates that these councils are actively looking at alternatives to euthanasia, and you can see the number of dogs and cats being either on sold or released to other organisations for rehoming continues to increase. This 'snapshot' of council pound activity is certainly demonstrating they are proactive when it comes to alternatives to the "green dream".

In 2000, the rehoming rate was only 18.4% but in 2005 this has risen to 19.6%.

NSW legislation further supports this strategy by allowing any animal to be released to an approved animal welfare organisation, and held without the requirement to lifetime register, which is normally required.



Clause 17 of the Companion Animals Regulation allows those breed and animal welfare rescue groups to spend their money on desexing and veterinary bills instead of registration. The cost of registration is met by the new owner when the dog or cat is eventually rehomed with almost all of those animals desexed when placed.

What does the future hold for NSW?

While a certain amount of opposition continues some seven years after compulsory microchipping was introduced, microchipping has dramatically improved the chances of a lost pet being reunited with it's owner. Microchipping has decreased the euthanasia rate and increased opportunities for councils and breed and animal rescue organisations to work together to rehome unclaimed dogs and cats.

The NSW Government is committed to continuing to assist councils across NSW with proactive policies that promote that well worn phrase "responsible pet ownership".

So, our future? The Government has recently committed to spending over a million dollars over the next three years on responsible pet ownership and dog bite prevention programs for our school children.

Some would say we have missed out on educating this generation to responsibly care for their pets, but rest assured, we are doing everything we can to make sure we don't miss out on teaching "responsible pet ownership" to the next generation of pet owners.

Finally, I believe we have achieved a lot in the last seven years or so, and there is still a long way to go.

It is clear that compulsory microchipping has had a significant positive impact on, not only the pets, but the pet owning population in NSW and that can only mean one thing—improving the lives of pets for the benefit of all.