

Farm cats and the myth of rat and mice control

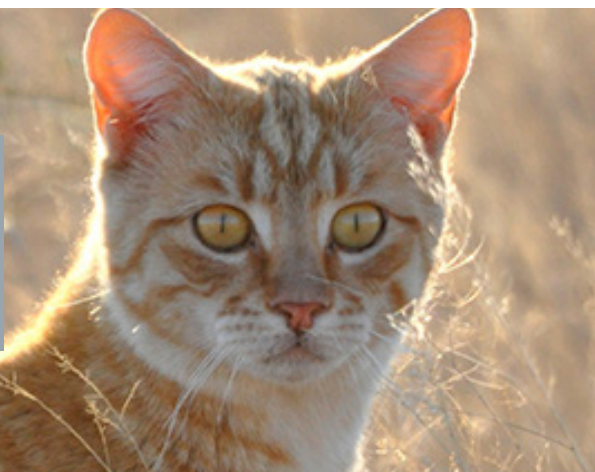


Image: Leigh Deutscher

Farm cats are sometimes kept and used by farmers around properties to help control rats and mice. However, there is very little research on this and no actual data that shows they are effective at controlling introduced rodents. Farm cats can pose a very real risk to livestock especially sheep, pigs, goats and poultry, native wildlife and even human health. Often the risks of keeping them around outweigh any benefits.



Image: Bruce Jackson

The myth of rat and mice control

It is commonly believed that rodent numbers can be controlled by cats. However, rats and mice populations are mainly controlled by environment and food availability rather than predators. Although farm cats may kill rats and mice around the farm and might keep numbers down if they are very low to begin with, they are not a reliable control method and are unlikely to clear out an existing infestation or be effective during a plague. When conditions are good for rodents, rodent numbers will be high, regardless of the presence of some farm cats.

Impacts on agriculture

Two main cat-borne parasitic diseases can significantly impact livestock.

“Toxoplasmosis has been shown to be the cause of an average of 17% of sheep abortions in Australia and can be as high as 60% or more in some areas.”

Toxoplasmosis can cause direct losses to sheep graziers and pig, goat and poultry farmers, through livestock miscarriages, still births and birth defects. Toxoplasmosis has been shown to be the cause of an average of 17% of sheep abortions in Australia and can be as high as 60% or more in some areas.

Sarcosporidiosis (or Sarcocystis), can impose further economic costs to sheep producers through production of cysts in the muscle tissue of sheep, reducing the quality of the meat and causing some, or all, of the animal to be condemned at the abattoir.

Toxoplasmosis and Sarcosporidiosis are spread by oocysts (like eggs) in cat faeces that can contaminate feed in hay sheds, silos, feed bins and out in the pasture.

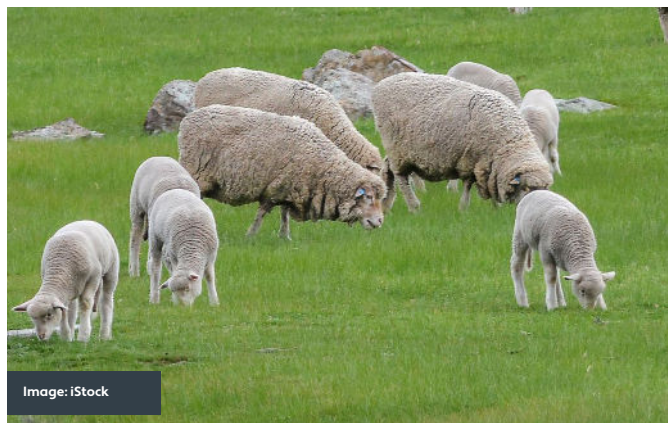


Image: iStock

Impact on human health

Farm cats that are allowed to roam around animal feedlots, stalls and barns can spread Toxoplasmosis to all livestock, increasing the risk of transmitting the disease to humans. Toxoplasmosis can cause debilitation, miscarriage and congenital birth defects in humans as well as trigger mental and other health issues.

Cats, especially those that are allowed to roam, can also act as carriers of diseases and bacteria transmitted to humans through bites, scratches, or contact with their bodily fluids and waste.



Impact on native birds and other wildlife

There is no guarantee that farm cats will stay around sheds and equipment - they often get bored and wander off. While farm cats may kill some introduced mice and rats in and around farms, they will hunt for what is easiest, which is often native birds, reptiles, frogs or small native mammals.

This impact is likely higher where cats live closer to natural environments. Feeding farm cats does not alter ranging or hunting behaviour. Even well-fed farm cats are likely to roam and cause greater impact on native animals found on and around the farm as they hunt for pleasure rather than just for food.

“The risks of using farm cats to control rats and mice often outweigh the benefits.”

Check out MouseAlert



MouseAlert is a free phone app and website that grain producers and farmers can use to record and report the prevalence of mice before they become a major issue. It can help you get early warnings of possible plagues and to notify producers in your region about changes in mouse activity, which can help everyone reduce the problems they cause. Information is also used by researchers to make predictions about future mice outbreaks.’=

Find out more:

www.feralscan.org.au/mousealert

What can you do?

The risks of using farm cats to control rats and mice often outweigh the benefits. It is a good idea to explore other rodent control methods and make sure you undertake control at the right time with your neighbours, not just once an outbreak has occurred. Mouse-proof feed storage areas and actively control them using traps and if necessary, baits (be aware of secondary poisoning by Second Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticides or SGARs).

If you must have farm cats, make sure they are all desexed and cared for, numbers are low and keep kittens and young cats away from stock feed as they are most likely to be infectious with Toxoplasmosis at this time.

Help predict future mice outbreaks. Monitor rainfall patterns, crop yields, and mice activity and populations on your property. Use chew cards, look for droppings, active burrows or crop/feed damage. And ensure you log all sightings on MouseAlert.

More information

Visit feralcatandfox.com.au for more information on feral cats and how to manage them on your property.

Note: The National Feral Cat and Fox Management Coordination Program is funded by the Australian Government via the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions.