



Felixer vs. Felis Project: community engagement report



PROGRAM

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For bibliographic purposes this paper should be cited as:

Berris, K. K., Mulvaney, J., Florance, B., Hodgens, P. and Bolwell, V. (2019). *Felixer versus Felis* project: community engagement report. Natural Resources Kangaroo Island, Kingscote.

FUNDING:

This project was supported by the Kangaroo Island Natural Resources Management Board, through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program.

FRONT COVER IMAGES:

Left photo – interactive voting using marbles was used at the Kingscote and Parndana Agricultural Show, along with face-to-face surveys, to gauge community support for feral cat eradication. *Photo by Natural Resources Kangaroo Island.*

Right photo – Feral cat liaison officer Karleah Berris conducting landholder surveys at the Kingscote Agricultural Show 2018. *Photo by Natural Resources Kangaroo Island.*

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Introduction

The Felixer versus Felis project was funded through the Australian Government's Threatened Species Recovery Fund. It aimed to engage landholders in feral cat control activities on Kangaroo Island and investigate the effectiveness of the Felixer™ grooming traps through field tests. There were two project activities pertaining to community engagement in this project:

1. Engage, train and support land managers and volunteers with feral cat control and monitoring activities
2. Gain community perspectives on feral cat control/eradication

In addition to this, two key evaluation questions were to be answered by this project:

1. Did the community participation strategy succeed in engaging the community in the project and build community support for feral cat eradication?
2. Is it appropriate for the community to be involved in feral cat monitoring and control?

This report documents the community engagement carried out during the Felixer versus Felis project, summarises the project team's progress towards the activities and addresses the key evaluation questions posed in this project.

Types of Community Engagement

Through the Felixer versus Felis project, community engagement was carried out with community groups, local landholders on the Dudley Peninsula and the wider Kangaroo Island community.

Community Engagement during the Felixer grooming trap trials

Local landholders from properties neighbouring the Felixer grooming trap trial property were contacted during the trials between December 2018 and June 2019. Project staff and operations officers working on feral cat control engaged regularly with these landholders to advise them on project activities, to provide them with neighbour notification of the use of 1080 on the trial property, to engage them in feral cat control on their properties and to obtain their feedback on their experiences during the trial. Records were kept on each visit or call made to landholders, the purpose of the call and any outcomes or follow up actions.

Eradication support surveys

Community surveys were carried out at the Kingscote and Parndana show days in late 2018 to ascertain whether people agree with the statement "Feral cats should be eradicated from Kangaroo Island". The results obtained in these surveys were then compared to the results of a previous survey about feral cat eradication on Kangaroo Island carried out in 2015.

Kangaroo Island community attitudinal viewpoints were surveyed through an Adelaide University PhD project by island residents receiving an invitation through the mail to participate in an online survey.

Feral cat control methodology survey

Surveys were carried out with local landholders either face-to-face or over the phone. The surveys sought to ascertain the support for feral cat eradication on Kangaroo Island and community attitudes on different cat control methodologies. Surveys were carried out with landholders with properties adjoining the Felixer grooming trap trial site, with a Dudley Peninsula community group and with landholders engaged with at the Kingscote and Parndana Show days in 2018.

Community feral cat control

Conversations were held with local landholders at the Kingscote and Parndana shows, at Felixer demonstrations and during the Felixer grooming trap trials. Landholders were asked about the feral cat control they were currently undertaking on their properties. They were also offered the opportunity to borrow cage traps from NRKI to undertake feral cat control. Four landholders provided with cage traps and given extra trapping support were then contacted at a later date to ascertain how successful their cage trapping efforts had been.

Results of Community Engagement

Landholder satisfaction with Felixer grooming trap trials

Feedback from the neighbouring landholders whose properties abutted the Felixer™ grooming trap trial site were generally positive. Nine landholders who resided at, or had visited their properties neighbouring the Felixer site, all said they had not noticed any adverse impacts due to the trial being conducted next door, and all said that they were happy that feral cat eradication was underway. Three other neighbouring landholders had not been to their properties during the trial, so did not have relevant feedback to contribute.

The Felixer trial site landholders did inform NRKI staff that they had conversations with at least one other property owner from the Dudley Peninsula who had approached them about the trials, due to concern over the use of the 1080 toxin. The Felixer site landholders said there was a misunderstanding by the people who approached them about how the Felixer machines work. The Felixer site landholders provided an explanation of how the toxin is delivered and how the Felixer machines are more target specific than baits. The other landholders accepted their explanation but still voiced concerns over the use of 1080 on Kangaroo Island. No neighbouring properties voiced concerns over the use of 1080 during or after the surveys.

Results of eradication support surveys

Surveys were conducted at the Parndana and Kingscote Agricultural Show days in both 2015 and 2018 to assess people's response to the statement "Feral cats should be eradicated from Kangaroo Island". In general, majority of respondents were supportive of feral cat eradication on Kangaroo Island (>97%) (Table 1) and there was no significant difference in support between years ($\chi^2 = 0.1332$, $p = 0.72$).

Table 1. Responses to the statement "Feral cats should be eradicated from Kangaroo Island" at Parndana and Kingscote Show in 2015 and 2018.

Survey year	Yes	No	Undecided
2015	97.52 % (n = 118)	1.65 % (n = 2)	0.83 % (n = 1)
2018	97.75 % (n = 217)	2.25 % (n = 5)	0.0 %

Results of the community attitudinal viewpoints surveyed as part of the Ph.D study being undertaken by Brooke Deak, University of Adelaide, are not yet available.

Results of feral cat control methodology survey

Face to face surveys were carried out at the Kingscote and Parndana Shows to ascertain people's awareness and perception of the use of the 1080 toxin for feral cat control. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. Do you support feral cat eradication on Kangaroo Island? (column 3)
2. Would you consider allowing the use of 1080 on your property (in either Felixer grooming traps or some other control type)? (column 4)
3. Do you think the eradication project should be able to use 1080 on parks (conservation/national parks) as part of the eradication project if:
 - a. The park was very close to your property (column 5)
 - b. The park was very remote (column 6)

In addition to the above questions, respondents were also asked about the current feral cat control methods used on their properties.

Of the 17 respondents, 8 of those (47%) said they currently undertook regular feral cat control on their properties, and all of those 8 said cage trapping was their primary control method. One respondent indicated they would be interested in monitoring feral cats. In general, most respondents were happy for 1080 to be used as part of feral cat control in conservation/national parks (Table 2) however only around half of respondents would allow it to be used on their property.

Table 2. Results of the face to face survey at Kingscote and Parndana Shows in 2018 on people's attitudes to the toxin 1080 for feral cat control on Kangaroo Island.

Total respondents	Do you support eradication?	Would you allow 1080 on your property?	Would you agree with the use of 1080 on a nearby park?	Would you agree with the use of 1080 on a remote park?
17	Yes = 100 % (n = 17)	Yes = 52.9% (n = 9)	Yes = 82.4 % (n = 14)	Yes = 88.2 % (n = 15)

The main reason cited for people not wanting 1080 on their own property was the risk to their domestic dogs. The main reason cited for people not wanting 1080 in conservation/national parks was potential off-target deaths of native animals and secondary poisoning to their domestic dogs if parks near their property were baited.

In May and June 2019 landholders on the Dudley Peninsula were contacted and face to face interviews were conducted about different feral cat control methods. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. Do you support feral cat eradication on Kangaroo Island? (column 2)
2. Would you be likely to participate in the feral cat eradication program by undertaking your own control on your property? (column 3)
3. Would you allow NRKI staff access to your property to undertake control on your property and what methods would you allow?
 - a. To do shooting of feral cats? (column 4)
 - b. Cage trapping of feral cats? (column 5)
 - c. Using the Felixer grooming traps containing 1080 (column 6)
 - d. Using cat baits that contain 1080? (column 7)

All nine respondents who indicated they would participate in feral cat control on their properties during the eradication indicated their preferred method of control would be cage trapping, and seven of those nine indicated they would like to borrow traps during the eradication if NRKI had traps to loan out. Most respondents were happy for NRKI staff to access their properties to undertake cage trapping of feral cats, and comparatively fewer indicated they would allow shooting or Felixers on their properties. Baits were the least supported control mechanism for private properties.

Table 3. Results of the face to face survey with Dudley Peninsula landholders in 2019 on people's attitudes and participation in different control methods.

Total respondents	Support eradication?	Would they participate in control?	Would they allow staff access for.....?			
			Shooting	Cage Trapping	Felixers	Baits
15	100 % (n = 15)	66.7 % (n = 10)	60.0 % (n = 9)	86.7 % (n = 13)	60.0 % (n = 9)	33.3 % (n = 5)

Results of community feral cat control

Of the 17 Kangaroo Island landholders interviewed at the Kingscote and Parndana Show days in 2018, 8 of those (47%) said they currently undertook regular feral cat control on their properties and all of those 8 said cage traps were their primary control method. Only one of the 17 landholders said they would be interested in assisting NRKI with monitoring of feral cats. Others cited a lack of time as the reason they could not contribute to monitoring.

Landholders neighbouring the Felixer Grooming trap trial site were asked if they had an interest in trapping feral cats with cage traps, and whether they had their own cage traps to do this. Four of the six surrounding landholders that could feasibly trap for feral cats indicated they did not have cage traps but were interested in trapping. Cage traps were subsequently provided to four of those landholders. Landholders who borrowed cage traps were encouraged to use tuna oil to mask their scent and to make traps more alluring to feral cats by spraying or squirting the trap with the oil once it was set. Landholders were also advised to try and set the trap under a bush near a wildlife movement path or vehicle track. None of the 15 neighbouring landholders in the area owned domestic cats, however landholders did look for any form of identification on caught cats prior to humanely killing them. One landholder also released one of the project's radio-collared cats that was trapped so we could continue trials involving that cat. Three of the landholders that were lent traps later provided information on the feral cats they trapped during the Felixer grooming trap trials.

Table 4. Results of feral cat cage trapping carried out by landholders during February and March 2019

Landholder type	Feral cats trapped	Trap nights	Trap success
Vineyard	7	44	15.9 %
Sheep farm	1	8	12.5 %
Lifestyle	3	20-30	10 – 15%

Trap success for feral cats trapped by landholders was between 10 % and 15.9 %. This is similar to the trap success recorded by NRKI staff in the same area, which was 14.2 %, indicating that trapping by trained landholders can be just as effective as trapping conducted by field staff. One landholder required staff assistance to humanely kill a feral cat he trapped when he could not find another landholder to assist him. All other landholders had their own firearms and required licences to humanely kill the feral cats they trapped. Landholders all cited a lack of time as the biggest factor in preventing them from doing more feral cat trapping than they did. Procedures for cage trapping were explained verbally to landholders and NRKI has its own cage trapping brochure. In future it is recommended that landholders are provided with the “Standard operating procedure CAT002: Trapping of feral cats using cage traps” available from www.pestsmart.org.au.

Discussion

The surveys conducted during this and previous projects indicate there is widespread and ongoing community support for eradication of feral cats on Kangaroo Island. Community surveys conducted in 2018 showed > 97 % support for feral cat eradication, which was similar to the results obtained in a previous survey in 2015.

It must be stated upfront that all other surveys had relatively small sample sizes, however the surveys were sufficient to identify some major trends in community attitudes. Surveys indicated that cage trapping is a widely used and accepted methodology for feral cat control by Kangaroo Island landholders. Landholders who were supported by staff to employ best practice trapping techniques were able to achieve trap success rates similar to staff who undertook trapping in the area.

Therefore landholder trapping could be an important part of the eradication project if landholders are supported by staff to employ best practice trapping techniques. To increase the number of landholders participating in feral cat cage trapping, two barriers for landholders were identified:

1. Access to cage traps. Cage traps are expensive (~\$150 per trap) and most landholders surveyed who were interested in cage trapping indicated they would need to borrow cage traps to trap feral cats.
2. Access to firearms to humanely kill trapped feral cats in situ. One landholder was initially able to ask another landholder to humanely kill a feral cat he had trapped. Due to not owning a firearm or having a firearms licence he was unable to deal with a feral cat he later caught. NRKI staff were able to humanely kill this feral cat by transferring it to a facility where a carbon dioxide chamber was used. People living on lifestyle properties or small rural holdings may not have firearms therefore, in order to involve these people in trapping, a staff member would need to be available to either shoot or operate a carbon dioxide chamber to humanely kill any feral cats caught by these landholders. Alternatively it may be possible to develop a register of appropriately trained and qualified volunteers willing to assist landholders by humanely killing feral cats.

Landholders expressed more interest in being involved in cage trapping of feral cats than assisting NRKI with monitoring of feral cats. The use of the 1080 toxin for control of feral cats was not supported by all landholders. Only about half of landholders surveyed would agree to use 1080 on their property to control cats, and Felixer grooming traps were a more accepted delivery mechanism of the 1080 toxin than baits. The major concerns voiced by Kangaroo Island landholders regarding 1080 were the potential risk to domestic dogs and the off-target wildlife that may be impacted. Support for the use of 1080 on conservation/national parks was higher than on people’s own property, which is likely to be because a high number of landholders surveyed had domestic dogs. As dogs are prohibited from going into parks most landholders perception was 1080 in parks would pose a low risk to their dogs.

Landholders were not able to be involved in operation of the Felixer grooming traps due to the complexity of operating the machines, the requirement that people handling the 1080 cartridges be authorised, and the risk associated with handling the 1080 cartridges that the machine uses. Therefore only NRKI staff who had accreditation in *Level 1 – handle and supply mixed 1080 baits to landholders* operated the Felixer grooming traps. It is feasible that landholders could operate Felixer grooming traps, however they would need to be trained in the operation of the machines and acquire the relevant accreditation. NRKI staff had several software and operational issues with the Felixer grooming trap machines (documented in the Felixer versus Felis Technical Report). These machines are still only approved for use under an Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) research permit and data from the machines needs to be checked regularly to ensure they are complying with the off-target rates specified in the permit. Once these machines are easier to operate and the software has been refined further, there may be opportunities for accredited landholders to operate the Felixers.

Key Evaluation Question 1: Did the community participation strategy succeed in engaging the community in the project and build community support for feral cat eradication?

The Community Participation Strategy recommended that a Feral Cat Liaison Officer coordinate community engagement and landholder involvement in the project. This was undertaken, and having a central point of contact for landholders was useful. Recommendations for future community participation strategies are as follows:

1. The Strategy document was very high level, and it was hard to draw the connection between the high level goals and the actions employed on the ground. In future it is recommended that the high level goals, the strategies being used to achieve those goals and the actions that will support that strategy are outlined in a table, so that a direct connection can be made between actions and the goals they are helping to achieve. This will also make it easier to adapt actions and identify what actions are not working to achieve the goals.
2. The use of a community register, where landholder liaison was documented by staff and key details or follow up actions were documented, was helpful. It is recommended this continues in to the future with the eradication program.

Support for feral cat eradication was > 97% in 2015 and 2018. This demonstrates that there is strong support for feral cat eradication on Kangaroo Island. Although the community participation strategy did not result in a significant measurable increase in support for the project, support is already at a very high level and our goal in the future should be to maintain this level of support.

The experience and results of this project underlines the importance of direct face-to-face contact with landholders by on-ground staff before, during and on completion of feral cat eradication control work, in building community support.

Key Evaluation Question 2: Is it appropriate for the community to be involved in feral cat monitoring and control?

Many community members on Kangaroo Island already undertake feral cat control, and others have expressed a keen interest to be involved. A valuable outcome of this project is learning that cage trapping of feral cats appears to be the most commonly employed control method and is the activity that the most landholders indicated they were interested in undertaking. Only one out of 17 landholders expressed an interest in assisting to monitor feral cats. Most landholders indicated they would prefer to spend their time actively controlling feral cats. Lack of time was the most commonly cited reason for people choosing not to monitor feral cats, control feral cats or being unable to increase their current control intensity.

Providing staff support to interested landholders and having cage traps available for loan may increase the capacity of local landholders to cage trap feral cats. Around half of respondents in two surveys indicated they were already controlling feral cats through cage trapping or would like to as part of the eradication. Our work with local landholders has shown that if landholders are supported with information on best practice feral cat trapping practices and provided with cage traps, they can achieve similar trap success results to trained staff. Most respondents who were already trapping or indicated they were interested in trapping said they would borrow traps from NRKI if they were available.

The 1080 toxin has not been widely used on Kangaroo Island compared to other parts of Australia, due to the absence of foxes and European rabbits on the island – pests which are often controlled using 1080 baits. Despite this around 60 % of landholders would be happy to use a Felixer grooming trap on their property, which uses the 1080 toxin, although landholders were not able to operate the Felixer grooming traps during this project. Conditions under the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) Felixer research permit require people who handle the machines to be accredited and authorised with state authorities to handle 1080. In addition, operational issues with the Felixer machines are still being addressed. If landholders were willing to obtain 1080 accreditation and be trained by NRKI staff in the use of the machines, it may be possible for landholders to use them at some stage in the future.

In order to ensure the Kangaroo Island feral cat eradication program addresses the animal welfare concerns of the wider community and has social licence to operate, it will be important that all landholders working with the eradication program are properly trained and supported by NRKI staff to ensure the welfare of any animals are trapped is not compromised. Some landholders are keen to contribute but do not have the means to humanely kill feral cats once caught, so staff will need to assist these landholders if they are going to be involved in the eradication.

For the community to be involved in cage trapping as part of the feral cat eradication, NRKI staff will need to provide the following support and assistance:

- Loaning cage traps to landholders who cannot afford to buy their own traps.
- Training landholders in best trapping practice to increase trap success and ensure all feral cats caught are humanely killed as soon as possible after being trapped.
- Training landholders in best trapping practice to minimise non-target captures and to ensure any non-target animals caught are appropriately assessed for signs of injury, released if deemed fit, and any injured wildlife transferred promptly to an approved wildlife carer or veterinarian for further assessment and/or treatment.
- Assisting landholders to determine that any trapped cat is not an owned domestic cat.
- Humanely killing trapped cats for landholders who do not have a firearms licence or firearms.
- Organising coordinated trapping efforts across the landscape so that feral cat control is effective over large areas.

Acknowledgements

NRKI staff would like to acknowledge all the Kangaroo Island landholders who participated in the Felixer versus Felis project, through allowing staff access to their properties, participating in project activities and taking the time to answer our various survey questions. This project was supported by the Kangaroo Island Natural Resources Management Board, through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program