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‘PRIORITY FOR CONSERVATION’

# Gene war strategy to rub out feral cats

**EXCLUSIVE**

**GREG BEARUP**

In a move that has excited some conservationists, and horrified others, the CSIRO is to investigate the use of genetically modified cats to eradicate Australia’s marauding feral cat population.

The science body recently signed an agreement with conservation group Australian Wildlife Conservancy to begin research that could see gene-drive technology deployed on feral cats.

“Feral cats are killing millions of native birds, millions of our reptiles and millions of mammals every single day,” said AWC chief executive Atticus Fleming.

“This has to be the highest priority for conservation in Australia as nothing causes more damage to native fauna than feral cats.”

Apart from fencing endangered mammals off in feral-free nature reserves, developing gene drive to combat feral cats “is the only glimmer of hope” many native mammals have in being saved from extinction, he said.

The theory behind the project is to genetically engineer cats that produce only male offspring.

These cats would be released

across the continent and within a number of generations this gene would spread throughout the population and feral cats would breed themselves out of existence.

It would not affect domestic cats unless they bred with feral cats that had the gene.

The technology, if successful, could also be deployed on invasive pests such as cane toads, carp, rabbits and foxes.

Bill Gates has spent tens of millions of dollars on developing gene drive in mosquitoes in his bid to eradicate malaria.

It has been proven in laboratory conditions on the insects but has not been released in the environment.

Owain Edwards, the head of environmental and synthetic genomics at the CSIRO who will oversee the research, told *The Weekend Australian* that work had already begun on developing the technology in rodents but it would be years before research was advanced enough to move on to cats.

Then there is the issue of regulatory approval and community acceptance.

There is great resistance among some to all things genet-

ically modified and millions of cat lovers the world over would oppose its release.

Former Greens leader Bob Brown said while he was fully aware of the immense damage cats caused to our native species, he was urging caution. “When it comes to the CSIRO, aren’t they the folk who introduced the cane toads?” Dr Brown said.

“Scientists don’t have any greater grasp on ethics than anybody else. Steady on, ladies and gentlemen — let’s have a public debate.”

He said if the gene spread to the northern hemisphere and into its native cat populations, it could devastate those wild species. “It would be a wonderful thing to be rid of feral cats and foxes,” he said. “But despite the huge prize that is dangling, we need to have the necessary safeguards in place.”

Dr Edwards agreed there needed to be a rigorous public debate before genetically modified cats were released in the wild.

While research had begun on gene drive in rodents, it would be several years before they could even contemplate studying the technology in cats, he said.

“It is very exciting,” Dr



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Edwards said, “but it is very much a long-term strategy ... we’re not saying that this can happen quickly.”

Under the agreement signed with AWC, the conservation organisation is required to rustle up the funding for the CSIRO to take the research from rodents to cats.

AWC is planning a major fundraising effort to get the community involved in the project.

“We will be asking everyone from mums and dads to philanthropists to support this,” Mr Fleming said.

“We know that if they do, it will put pressure on the government to co-invest.”

## INSIDE



SAVING OUR MAMMALS