

goats, cattle, alpacas and various wildlife, are able to be cremated by the charity.

The AWL has also introduced an electronic tracking system which follows all deceased animals from the vet clinic through to transport and arrival to AWL's pet cremation chambers. The vet can sign in at any time to track where the animal is for complete peace of mind.

"This is especially helpful where grieving owners need to know when their beloved pet will be returned to them," said Mr Mussell.

The AWL also offers various other memorials, keepsakes when ashes are returned, home pick-up and drop off service and a platinum same-day pickup, cremation and return service – broadening their scope of offerings.

"We are delivering the same type of service but in different ways. You have to be flexible and offer these options," said Mr Mussell. "The AWL Pet Cremations team is here to support the community in all aspects of animal care and ownership. The crematorium is another spoke in the wheel of honouring animals – just at the end of their life."

An important feature of the new facility is a private viewing room which provides "a private, safe and quiet space directly in view of their pet's cremation chamber to ensure they can remain by their pet's side right to the end," he said

In the USA, a pet cremation survey revealed 20 per cent of pet owners wanted to witness the cremation process. Sometimes that was presented by a webcam video link, but most people preferred to be there in person, Mr Mussell explained. So with this in mind, the AWL developed a viewing room separated by a large window for owners who wish to watch their pet's cremation, and this opportunity has already been very well-received, said the CEO.

The organisation also has a Memorial Wall and Garden, offering a place of comfort for many people's pets over the years. "People still come and reflect in the years after their pet has passed," said Mr Mussell.

At their Wingfield site, the AWL has the capacity for more than 600 memorials

and at present they are 75 per cent full; hence the need to expand this in the near future.

"Many people like to be prepared in the event something happens to their pet, so we can certainly make arrangements for a prepaid cremation or space in the Memorial Wall or Garden," he added.

Mr Mussell said pet cremation is an expensive business to get into with the overall investment in this project exceeding \$5 million.

"If you do it, do it properly. The AWL strives to lift the bar all the time in every aspect of our work with and for animals and the community. If everyone shares their knowledge and improves standards, we will improve the industry," he stated. "With growth in demand and increase in pet ownership, it's important that the industry maintains a dignified, professional and transparent service.

The industry overall is highly regulated in relation to certified equipment and environmental emission monitoring, but less so in terms of standards of animal after life care, and this is something we want to change."

The AWL will also receive accreditation by the International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories, which provides training, oversight and professional standards.

"The AWL believes that dignity, care and compassion are paramount, and we want people to understand the importance we place on their beloved pet's dignity," said Mr Mussell. "When choosing to honour the memory of their pet, people need to know that their pet is still loved and cared for. We want them to understand that their legacy will live on in the care we can provide to other animals in need, because through loss comes hope."

Mr Mussell believes the pet funeral service space will continue to evolve and possibly model the human industry to a large extent, because when dealing with grief there is not a set service to cover everyone.

"In the USA it is very popular, and we are seeing a similar growth here in Australia. The AWL aims to provide a bespoke service to each pet's family to allow them



to come to terms with their grief," he said.

However, the CEO does have concerns about the industry's future given the lack of regulations.

"We need to be transparent – there's currently not enough of that and there's always room for growth," he explained. "If a business is claiming certain things on their website, then that needs to be supported with equipment meant to do that! The credibility is up to the industry to develop and drive the change. Businesses need to have licensing and regulations covered off."

Treating pets with dignity and respect

Caroline Higgins from Paws Reflect Pet Funeral Services in Victoria has been conducting a variety of ceremonies for over a decade and feels very connected to animals. She cares most about making sure the pet is treated with respect and dignity.

"Mostly clients want to know their options when their pet dies, because people are more invested emotionally and spiritually in their animals," she said. Ms Higgins also collects deceased animals from their home in a ceremonious way.

"I kneel to the pet and wrap them in a certain way. It helps the family see me treat their pet in a sacred way. It's a big thing to have your elder pet die and for some, it is devastating beyond the norm," she said. "It's the human condition of loving this animal and making the pet a whole being, a big part of your life, not just a pet."

Many clients also have a fear their pet will not be individually cremated, so they watch the cremation to make sure it is done the way they wanted, she added.

