

Florida Passes Feral Cat Policy

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On May 30, 2003, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) passed a policy regarding feral and free-roaming cats. The policy states that in being entrusted by the public with the responsibility of safeguarding wildlife resources, FWC is obligated "to protect native wildlife from predation, disease, and other impacts presented by feral and free-ranging cats." The primary focus of the policy is to provide technical advice, policy support, and partnerships with land-management agencies to lessen the impacts of cats where they pose a significant threat to local wildlife populations on public conservation lands.

During the months preceding the vote, the draft policy sparked mobilization of feral cat advocacy groups and significant press coverage. An earlier draft of the policy called for opposing "trap-neuter-release" (TNR) programs wherever they potentially impact local wildlife populations; however, this reference was removed from the final policy. Regarding TNR, the FWC stated that while it does not endorse this approach to feral cat management, the primary focus for the new policy is to lessen specific adverse impacts of feral and free-ranging cats on rare wildlife species inhabiting lands owned or managed by the Commission.

Trap-neuter-release programs are being conducted with private and public funding in cities, suburbs, military bases, college campuses, parks, farms, and natural areas around the United States. Colonies of stray and feral cats form around artificial feeding sources, such as garbage dumps or places where people deliberately provide food for them. Trap-neuter-release programs involve humane trapping of feral cats, surgical sterilization, and release at the site of capture. However, not all agree that TNR is the best approach to management of feral cats.

By virtue of their profession, veterinarians have been drawn into the middle of the TNR controversy. Advocates of TNR believe that leaving sterilized cats in an established colony is the best deterrent to population growth, as members will defend the territory, limiting the addition of new, sexually intact cats to the group. The ultimate goal of the TNR program or "managed colony," as stated by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), is colony size reduction by alteration and adoption and eventual elimination by attrition. In 1996, the AVMA drew up an extensive list of minimum requirements for "managed colonies" in the interest of the health and welfare of the cats and the public. Notably, these requirements include "restriction of the colony to a well-defined area, *not on lands managed for wildlife or other natural resources.*"

Opponents of TNR programs regard feral cats living in "managed colonies" as non-native, invasive, subsidized predators. They observe that feral cats lead short, brutal lives and believe that those who participate in TNR programs prolong the suffering of feral cats still facing a multitude of hazards and diseases. Furthermore, opponents note that veterinarians and others who treat and release feral cats may be violating animal abandonment laws in some localities. Also at issue is the fact that feral cat colonies

pose numerous public health risks, not all of which can be mitigated by vaccination and deworming. These concerns already have prompted professional organizations such as the National Association of Public Health Veterinarians, American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, and American Association of Avian Veterinarians to pass resolutions opposing TNR.

The debate among veterinarians supporting and opposing TNR programs was evident at the annual meeting of the AVMA in Nashville, Tennessee, in July 2002. Dr. Julie Levy, assistant professor at the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine and cofounder of "Operation Catnip," a TNR program that began on the university campus, presented seminars in the session "Free-Roaming and Feral Cats and the Public." Dr. David Jessup, senior veterinarian with the California Department of Fish and Game, presented seminars in the counterpoint session "Feral and Free-Roaming Cats; the Flip Side of the Coin." Another seminar on management of abandoned and feral cats is scheduled for the 2003 AVMA Animal Welfare Forum to be held in Chicago in November.

How many homeless domestic cats are there in the United States? Estimates range from 30-60 million stray (abandoned or lost) and feral (unsocialized offspring of strays) cats. In addition, only an estimated 35% of the more than 73 million owned pet cats are kept exclusively indoors, leaving 47 million free to roam outdoors. These highly efficient predators may be particularly devastating to wild birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians that are small or restricted in their distribution. Certainly, more scientific studies are needed to fully document the impacts of roaming cats on native wildlife, but as evidence mounts, wildlife professionals feel compelled to act.

Resolution of this complex problem requires a cooperative, multi-disciplinary approach, and the solution depends in part on wildlife health professionals contributing scientific information to the discussion. As Dr. Tonie Rocke, past president of the Wildlife Disease Association, commented, "We would all agree that efforts to reduce feral cat populations and the numbers of animals killed in animal shelters are laudable goals." Despite their differences, advocates and opponents of TNR are united in sharing a common goal (to make abandonment of unwanted pet cats a thing of the past), a common understanding (that the feral cat problem is, at root, a *people* problem), and a common strategy (education). Indeed, a key component of the FWC policy specifies that the agency will develop a public-awareness campaign focusing on responsible cat ownership and the impact on native wildlife posed by feral and free-roaming cats. (Prepared by Cynthia Tate)