

A Model Feral Cat Policy

Shelters must acknowledge that the killing of healthy feral cats is a profound failure at all levels—the public’s intolerance toward feral cats, the law’s failure to distinguish between feral cats and stray pet cats, and the view of some that animals are disposable. A municipal shelter which kills these cats may claim it has no choice, but this is rarely accurate. In addition, a shelter cannot and should not abdicate its responsibility altogether. If it is going to accept feral cats, it should demand and implement alternatives to killing. We provide a model policy.

As a progressive animal advocacy organization, the No Kill Advocacy Center recognizes that feral cats are protected healthy wildlife and should not enter shelters in the first place. The No Kill Advocacy Center also recognizes that shelters should not lend traps or assistance to people who want to trap feral cats for purposes of removing them from their habitat and subsequent destruction.

This philosophy—while unassailable on its own—is part of a growing consensus in the humane community. For example, nearly 10,000 groups and individuals have signed the *U.S. No Kill Declaration*. In terms of feral cats, the *Declaration* calls for:

An end to the policy of accepting trapped feral cats to be destroyed as unadoptable, and implementation of TNR as the accepted method of feral cat control by educating the public about TNR and offering TNR program services.

It further calls for:

Abolishment of trapping, lending traps to the public to capture animals, and support of trapping by shelters, governments, and pest control companies for the purposes of removing animals to be killed.

Because they are unsocialized to people, feral cats are not generally considered adoption candidates. As such, unwanted feral cats are routinely killed in many shelters throughout the nation. All shelters, therefore, must create educational and non-lethal sterilization programs that utilize citizen support and volunteers. A Trap-Neuter-Return (“TNR”) program is the solution to reaching the goal of greatly reducing citizen calls and complaints about outdoor cats, as well as reducing unnecessary feral cat intake and subsequent death rates in municipal shelters.



State laws, by contrast, often require that municipal shelters provide cat control, including a shelter for stray animals. Because these laws do not distinguish between “stray” and “feral” and because perceived feral cats may be frightened pets, animal control shelters often accept feral cats who reside within their jurisdiction. (Although it is inevitable that the No Kill paradigm will eventually lead to laws that make it illegal for people to trap and shelters to kill healthy feral cats, the same way such laws in California currently protect healthy wildlife. The No Kill Advocacy

Center encourages and supports such laws and

calls upon shelters, especially those which kill feral cats, to promote them as well.)

Unfortunately, not everyone in the community is tolerant of feral cats. But that does not mean animal shelters are powerless to balance their animal “care” and “control” functions when it comes to feral cats, or to put in place programs to change the life and death calculus for feral cats while maintaining the shelter’s municipally mandated roles. For example, animal control’s mandate to protect public health and safety is consistent with and, in fact, enhanced by a TNR program. (See *TNR: An ACO’s Perspective in No Kill Sheltering*, November/December 2005, Volume 1, Issue 6.)

Many animal control agencies in communities throughout the United States are embracing TNR to improve animal welfare, reduce the death rate, and meet obligations to public welfare and neighborhood tranquility demanded by governments. According to Alley Cat Allies, the nation’s leading TNR advocacy organization, TNR “is a full management plan in which stray and feral cats already living outdoors in cities, towns, and rural areas are humanely trapped, then rabies vaccinated, and sterilized by veterinarians. Kittens and tame cats are adopted into good homes. Adult cats too wild to be adopted are returned to their habitats.”

In community surveys throughout the United States, it was found that the majority of callers to animal control regarding feral cats did not want them killed. Those same studies also found that public health departments, together with animal control agencies, are seeking effective and cost-effective long-term solutions that respond to the public’s increasing desire to see feral cats treated with humane, non-lethal methods. TNR proved to be the most effective solution to reducing complaints, improving public health and safety, lowering costs, and increasing lifesaving.

In order to reduce the number of feral cats who enter the shelter and—once there—who are killed, a shelter should make information about humane care of feral cats such as TNR available on its website, over the telephone, in the shelter, and as public relations opportunities dictate and allow. An important aspect of the program is to educate citizens to view feral cats in the same vein as protected wildlife.

In addition, staff who have contact with the public must do the following when someone calls about feral cats or when residents attempt to bring in feral cats:

TNR proved to be the most effective solution to reducing complaints, improving public health and safety, lowering costs, and increasing lifesaving for municipal shelters across the country.

1. Staff—including field officers—should be trained to respond to public calls about outdoor cats by informing people about the benefits of TNR including the shelter’s sterilization services.

2. Staff—including field officers—should explain that the cat will be killed if left at the shelter if the shelter is going to accept the cat. The public is not to be presented with anything less than an honest assessment of what is likely to happen or be provided a false hope or assurance that the cat will be

relocated or rehomed unless the shelter has created such a program. (If the shelter is not required to accept feral cats, the shelter should not kill the cat.)

3. Staff—including field officers—should explain the shelter’s feral cat program, which includes spay/neuter assistance. Information on TNR is to be made available to the person at this time. Staff is then to encourage the person to use the TNR program as an alternative.

4. If the person agrees, an appointment is made to bring in the cat for surgery or alternatively a voucher is sent to the person. If the cat is already in the trap, the person should bring in the cat and an appointment for surgery should

be made as soon as possible. The person should then be told when to return for the cat.

5. All feral cats entering the TNR program should be sterilized and given a rabies vaccination. They should also have their ear tipped for visual identification as having participated in the program.

6. If the person does not agree to the program, the call should be referred to a community programs coordinator. This immediate intervention prevents cats from entering the shelter where they do not belong and allows for TNR to be implemented for the colony after a visit to the field and information gathered.

7. The community programs coordinator should collect and process this data in order for areas of cats to be pinpointed and mapped.

8. Staff should utilize tools (e.g., door-hangers, how-to fact sheets and educational videos) to organize and educate citizens in order for TNR to be a proactive component of the shelter's No Kill initiative.

9. If a citizen brings a feral cat into the shelter and the shelter accepts the cat for any other purpose than TNR, information should be recorded with the exact address where trapped, the person who relinquished, and why trapping was done. The community programs coordinator or field officers should initiate communication with the neighbors from this location to return the cat if the cat is a lost/stolen pet or feral cat being fed. The cat may also be held and evaluated. If the cat is not feral, adoption can occur after the stray impound period. If the cat exhibits behavior consistent with being feral, the cat may immediately become a part of the feral cat program.

10. As an alternative, the animal handler should contact local feral cat groups, seek an alternative release site for the cat, and contact rescue groups if the cat does not enter the feral cat program and is not returned to the colony site.

11. As a final last resort, the cat should be sterilized and released in an alternative location.

Finally, to provide them a sense of security and therefore reduce their stress, all feral cats should be provided with hiding boxes in their kennels and should be handled only as necessary with a humane feral cat restraint system. The use of control poles should never be allowed.

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