

Position Statement on Abandoned and Feral Cat Colonies
Animal Welfare Committee Draft – October 2019

The following is the position statement of the VVMA on colonies of free-roaming, abandoned, and feral cats. We recognize that this issue is complex and carries a high emotional charge for many. We have arrived at this position after careful study of the issues involved, and have closely referenced similar position statements of the AAFP (American Association of Feline Practitioners), HSUS (Humane Society of the United States) and AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Association).

Cats labeled as 'feral' may be well-socialized to humans, not at all socialized, or somewhere in between. For cats socialized to humans, it is in the cats' best interest to be cared for and provided with medical care, and usually to live at least partly, if not completely, indoors. Cat group numbers should be small enough that each cat can be provided personal attention and medical care.

Cat colonies, especially if unmanaged, can be problematic. Feral cat colonies can serve as reservoirs of disease for pet cats, humans, and local wildlife. They contribute to pet over-population, and even if well fed will kill local wildlife, including songbirds. Compared with owned cats, the welfare of these cats is significantly diminished. The mortality rate of kittens born in an outdoor environment can approach 75% at six months of age. Their life expectancy is often less than five years, during which time they may have a poor quality of life. Death from trauma, disease, starvation and climatic challenges is common. Medical care and treatment is not routinely available and difficult to administer.

Cats have the ability to exist outside of human intervention, but cat colonies usually form near humans due to humans' laxity about control of garbage and other food sources. The colonies are then perpetuated and expanded by humans who leave food out. Often the food is attractive to other wildlife and sanitation problems worsen. Previously owned cats may be abandoned at colony sites, compounding the problem. Trapping and euthanizing entire colonies is not a workable solution and often creates an unbridgeable emotional gap between animal control authorities and people who care for cat colonies. If the conditions that gave rise to the colony in the first place are not changed, new cats will arrive to fill the gap.

Over the past several decades, strategies such as trap-neuter-release and its variants have been advocated as an alternative method of colony management. Studies differ as to whether this approach actually prevents

growth of the colony; effectiveness seems to depend on thorough, attentive management and close cooperation between the animal control authorities and cat care providers.

1. New colonies should be discouraged from forming by appropriate human control of potential habitat, garbage, and other food sources.
2. Each colony should be managed with the goal of eventual reduction of the cat population to zero. In the case of intentional colonies (such as working barn cats), the goal should be the elimination of reproduction within the colony.
3. Each colony should be well-managed, with designated human caregivers to track populations and individual cats and to provide medical care.
4. Each cat should be humanely trapped. Cats should undergo a complete medical evaluation by a veterinarian. Cats who are sufficiently socialized to humans should be adopted out to caring homes through shelter channels. Cats who are returned to the colony should be vaccinated against rabies, sterilized, and marked by ear tipping.**
5. Cat colonies should be inconspicuous so as not to encourage abandonment of owned cats and food must be consumed or removed by nightfall so as not to attract pests and wildlife.
6. Cat colonies must be managed in accordance with local ordinances, with landowner permission, and not on public land or in locations where protected wildlife is threatened. All free-roaming cats not in managed colonies with designated human care givers should be removed and treated according to local ordinances.
7. We recognize the need for and we support public education concerning the causes of cat abandonment and the negative impacts of free-roaming cat colonies on the health and well-being of humans, other felines, and our wildlife populations.

***For more information on recommended treatment, see revised AVMA policy on feral cat colonies:*
<https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Free-roaming-Abandoned-and-Feral-Cats.aspx>