

## **Policy and Protocol: Feral Cats**

### **1. Description**

#### *Feral Cats Defined*

A continuum of lifestyles exists between socialized house cats, free roaming, previously socialized or "loosely owned" neighborhood strays; and true unowned, unsocialized feral cats. Feral cats are 'wild' offspring of domestic cats and result from pet owners' abandoning and/or failing to neuter their pets. They generally do not allow handling by humans and must be trapped in order to be presented to a veterinarian for care. Free-roaming and feral cats form colonies surrounding a "home base", which includes a source of food and shelter. Areas with garbage dumpsters and/or livestock barns are prime locations in which colonies form since they offer a supply of rodents and discarded foodstuffs. Cats typically seek shelter in crawl spaces beneath buildings or other nearby structures.

Like wildlife species, when raised without human contact, cats remain extremely wary of humans and flee if approached. Unlike wildlife species however, cats can not fully fend for themselves. Unattended, they survive, but do not thrive, breed prolifically and frequently suffer from malnutrition, trauma and exposure. The mortality rate of kittens is high with fewer than 25% typically surviving beyond 4-6 months of age.

#### *Trap-Neuter-Return*

"Trap, Neuter, Return" (TNR) is a humane, non-lethal method of managing existing colonies of feral cats and represents a legitimate response to existing colonies of cats with caretakers. Cats are trapped, vaccinated, neutered and then returned to their "home" for release. The tip of the left ear is cropped to identify the cats as having been sterilized. This is the standard symbol for a sterilized free-roaming/feral cat. Caretakers take responsibility for feeding and monitoring the health of the cats in the future. Relocation of feral cat colonies is frequently unsuccessful and is not generally advised since cats possess strong homing instincts and will try to return to their original home base. If relocation is necessary, cats should be confined at the site for a period of 2-4 weeks prior to release to allow a chance for acclimation, improving the success of relocation and enhancing welfare.

### **2. General policies regarding feral/free-roaming cats**

#### *Policy regarding cats and caretakers*

Only unowned, free-roaming and feral cats will be trapped, neutered and returned to their colonies. A responsible caretaker must be identified for each colony as a prerequisite for performing TNR. Socialized (tame) cats should be placed in homes as pet cats. Whenever possible, TNR will be advocated for and utilized as the best option for management of healthy juvenile and adult feral cats; and following surgery caretakers will be provided with written discharge and release instructions for their cats. If TNR is refused, careful relocation of feral cats may be elected provided caretakers are identified by the end of the legal holding period and relocation protocols are explained to the caretaker. A feral cat relocation cage together with written instructions will be made available to caretakers to facilitate the process.

*Policy regarding education and prevention*

To prevent the existence of additional feral cats, responsible cat ownership will be promoted, focusing on sterilization, the wearing of identification, preventive health care and keeping cats safe at home.

*Policy regarding handling of cats*

Only shelter staff, that have been vaccinated against rabies will care for and handle feral cats. Whenever possible, feral cats will not be handled directly but will be transferred using cat dens, guillotine doors, nets or other humane restraint equipment. Whenever possible, feral cats will be sedated or anesthetized prior to extensive handling.

*Policy regarding small kittens*

Because the mortality rate of feral kittens is 75% on average, small kittens will be tamed and adopted or humanely euthanized.

*Policy regarding sick or injured cats*

Unless treatment can be entirely performed at the time of surgery (eg, cleaning/repairing a wound or extracting a tooth), humane euthanasia will be performed to prevent suffering.

*Policy regarding pregnant queens*

All pregnant queens will be spayed.

*Policy regarding nursing (lactating) queens*

If a lactating female is trapped, the caretaker should search the area for the kittens. If kittens cannot be located, every effort should be made by the caretaker to have the cat spayed and to release her within 24 hours of trapping so that she can care for and nurse her kittens.

*Policy regarding liability*

All volunteers are required to sign release forms prior to participating in TNR including both trap loan and clinic release forms. Rabies vaccination is recommended for volunteers that trap feral cats for TNR. Humane trapping and safety instructions will be provided to all volunteers. If a volunteer is scratched or bitten by a feral cat, they will be instructed NOT to release the cat and to bring it to the shelter for appropriate rabies quarantine.

*Scratch and Bite Policy*

In the case of any bite to a human, an official bite report must be completed and filed with the State Health Department within 24 hours or as soon as possible. In addition, an in-house bite report must also be completed. If the bite occurred prior to impoundment, it is imperative that the date of the bite and the name and contact information of the person who sustained the bite be recorded at the time of impoundment. The Health Department must be notified of this information by telephone within 24 hours or as soon as possible. Feral cats that have bitten a human should be euthanized and tested for rabies or may be quarantined for a 10-day observation period (bite hold) at the attending veterinarian's discretion.

### *Policy on Identification of “TNR graduates”*

To ensure that surgery is not performed on the same cat twice, the distal tip of the left ear of every cat will be removed. Cats with tipped left ears, therefore will readily be identified as graduates of TNR and will be released immediately if re-trapped. A tipped or cropped ear is the standard symbol for a sterilized free-roaming cat.

### *Policy on Medical Care during Surgery Clinics*

At the time of surgery, all cats will receive the following:

- physical examination

- FVRCP vaccination

- Rabies vaccination

- Ivomec 0.15 ml per 10 lb. cat SQ (this dosage treats ear mites, round and hook worms)

- +/- Advantage

Cats that are pregnant or dehydrated will also receive 150-250 ml SQ fluids.

Rabies vaccination will be recommended in 1 year and then every 3 years.

### *Policy on Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Testing*

Based on serological survey of thousands of feral cats, the incidence of FeLV in feral cats is estimated to be approximately 3%. Because of the low incidence of infection, the expense of testing and because neutering greatly reduces transmission of these viruses by decreasing fighting and preventing kitten births, testing will not be routinely performed on feral cats during the TNR program. (Paying to test cats *substantially increases* the cost per cat and, therefore decreases the number of cats that can be sterilized. This policy has been established in keeping with our mission, which is to humanely control the cat population: this can only be accomplished by spaying/neutering as many cats as possible.) However, if cats are to be relocated to known negative colonies, they will be tested by the shelter medicine staff at the time of surgery. If infected cats are identified, they will be euthanized in order to prevent their suffering and to prevent possible transmission of the virus to other cats in accordance with the policy regarding FeLV or FIV positive cats.

### *Policy regarding FeLV or FIV positive cats*

Feral cats that test positive for FeLV will be humanely euthanized since this virus commonly results in fatal disease within 2 years of infection and transmission is relatively common. This will serve to prevent suffering and spread of disease. Feral cats that test positive for FIV but that appear healthy may be released at the discretion of the veterinarian and the caretaker since cats with this virus commonly remain asymptomatic for five or more years and transmission is relatively uncommon once cats are neutered.

### 3. Recognition/Diagnosis/Behavioral Considerations and Housing

Cats that enter the shelter in traps or other feral behaving cats are not necessarily feral. Tame house cats that are trapped or that are very stressed may exhibit feral behavior. It can be challenging to differentiate feral cats and non-feral cats in the shelter.

- Ear tip

Removal of the tip of the ear has been used as the universal symbol for a sterilized free-roaming/feral cat. However, some cats with tipped ears may not be truly feral, but instead be tame. Thus the presence of an ear tip alone should not be used as a designation for feral: the ear tip only truly means that the cat has been spayed/neutered. Caution: do not mistake frostbite of the ear for a tipped ear.

- General body condition and physical features

Feral cats may be any age, size or color, however they are usually young (frequently less than 3 years of age) and are rarely overweight unless they have already undergone TNR. Prior to TNR, feral cats are most often in lean, wiry body condition. Unless they are ear tipped, feral cats should be assumed to be reproductively intact. Females may be pregnant or lactating especially between April and October. A large abdomen on a female may indicate pregnancy. If mature, males will have tomcat urine odor, a wide neck and big jowls. They often have scars on their face and ears, or torn ear flaps.

In contrast, freaked out tame cats may be overweight. Also, they may be older cats, which might be evident by looking for aging changes in the eyes and face. Geriatric cats are sometimes the most stressed cats in the shelter environment. They may be recognized by their lack of facial fat giving a more angular appearance to their face and mottled irises (the colored part of the eye) or a bluish color to the lens of the eye. These are subtle changes that may be recognized with experience.

- Behavior

Both feral and highly stressed tame cats may be stiff and frozen with dilated pupils. They may tuck their feet under them and try to hide or back into the farthest corner of the cage. They may strike out if approached, particularly feral tomcats.

Cats should be given strict “chill out time” to de-stress and acclimate to the shelter for at least 24 hours. They must have both a place to hide and a place to perch as they will feel instinctively safer. Their enclosures should be elevated off the floor and must be kept covered. They should not be in direct view of other cats. There should be regular light and dark cycles and noise control. A Feliway diffuser should be used since the pheromone has been shown to help reduce anxiety in cats.

After strict “chill out” time of 24-36 hours during which the cat is not handled, evaluation should then occur daily over the following 3-4 days for the 5-day holding period. Care should be taken during cleaning procedures to minimize stress and cats should be allowed to hide while their cage is quietly tidied and replenished around them as needed.

### Evaluation process, determination of behavior status and disposition:

The overarching goal of the evaluation process is to allow cats the opportunity to acclimate to the shelter and “show their true colors”. Cats that are identified as “tame” will be moved through normal procedures for cat holding and adoption. Cats that are truly feral will be handled according to the policies described within this document. Some timid or shy cats may receive special behavioral care to help them adapt to the shelter and prepare them for adoption. Finally, cats that are deemed to be severely stressed and suffering will be humanely euthanized if humane alternatives are unavailable to ameliorate their stress responses.

### Procedure:

Approach the front of the cage. Watch the cat’s body language.

Stand quietly. Do not stare at the cat, but instead look at the cat, then look away before looking back. Giving a "slow blink" may be helpful as a calming signal (this is unproven, however it will give the evaluator something to do during the observation so that he/she does not stare directly at the cat for a prolonged time.)

- Obvious feral or fractious behavior

The cat may signal right away that he is teetering on the edge or is highly fearful and defensive. Caution! Further evaluation is unsafe and will serve to make the cat even more highly reactive. In fact, it could even delay the acclimation process if the cat is not truly feral. There is no need to evaluate further at that time. Return the next day to assess the cat’s progress.

- Obvious tame cat behavior

Alternatively, the cat may come right up to the front of the cage and solicit attention by rubbing with his body, reaching with his paws or meowing. In this case, you may deem that it is safe to open the cage door and attempt to pet and even pick up the cat. If the cat is indeed easy to handle and tame, he can be transferred to general cat holding.

- In between responses

Many cats will respond somewhere in between “feral behaving” and “tame”. If the cat’s pupils relax and do not remain dilated, or if he looks away or his body becomes less tense, these may be signs that he is relaxing. Offer verbal encouragement and be patient. If the cat neither comes to you, nor tries to escape or defend himself, you may consider reaching your hand into the cage slowly. Be prepared to retreat should the cat react in an aggressive fashion. You may be able to reach into the cage above the cat’s head and slowly pet the head. If you are unsure if it is safe to reach into the cage, use the assess-a-hand. If the cat exhibits any aggressive behavior, discontinue the evaluation for the day and return the next day to evaluate his progress.

If the cat relaxes when you gently touch and pet his head-- and you deem it to be safe-- you may slowly reach behind his ears, gently grasp the scruff of his neck, and pull him toward you on his side. Then, hold him close to your body supporting and covering him under your

arm and walk over to the pen enclosure and sit with him on your lap, allowing him to hide in a towel or the nook of your arm. In this case, the cat may be fearful and stiff, but should be non-aggressive. Alternatively, a cat den can be used to transfer the cat calmly to the pen enclosure.

In the pen, the evaluation process can continue. Will the cat sit on your lap? Does he respond to gentle massage? Massaging the top of the head in a slow circular fashion may be calming (this is a known acupressure point). Does the cat relax? Does the cat warm up to petting, or does the cat remain stiff, frozen or retreat from your lap? If the cat becomes aggressive, the evaluation should stop for the day. The cat can be afforded some “chill out” time in the pen if he becomes highly reactive before being transferred back to his holding cage.

If the cat jumps down from your lap, take note of his behavior in the cage. As long as he is non-aggressive, continue to evaluate him. Is he interested in exploring the environment, or does he hide and retreat? Does he solicit attention from you? Make eye contact with you? Purr or meow? How does he respond to your reach and touch? Will he allow you to pet him? Only on the head, or can you stroke his back, too? Will he allow you to pick him up again? Is he fearful and stiff, or does he continue to relax? Try interacting with him with a cat dancer toy. Does he show any interest in play?

- Criteria to move as a “special needs behavior cat”:

Cats that allow petting and can be safely picked up and held in the handler’s lap by day 5, but remain shy/stiff/tense may be transferred to a quiet area of the shelter for special socialization and an extended acclimation period provided space and time permit. Note: for such cats, it is very important to have a consistent caregiver to facilitate relaxation and social contact. Multiple handlers can induce stress in shy, tense cats. History received at the time of surrender on stray/feral/trapped cats should be considered in such disposition decisions whenever possible. In addition, consideration will be given to adopting such cats directly to “barn homes” where appropriate to prevent long-term housing that may result in chronic stress.

#### 4. Notification

The shelter veterinarian should be consulted regarding the disposition of all “feral and feral-behaving” cats. She/he should be notified before cats are transferred to regular cat holding, adoption floor, scheduled for TNR, relocated or adopted to a barn home, or euthanized. If cats are transferred into the adoption program as either tame or “special needs behavior cats”, the med staff should be notified so that they can closely monitor the cats for behavioral and physical signs of stress including such responses as constant hiding and weight loss.

#### 5. Treatment

Special needs behavior cases will be carefully selected as described and monitored daily for progress. Consistent daily care by a dedicated caregiver should be provided with daily assessment. Housing should include opportunities for perching and hiding. Cats should be

rewarded for bold and friendly behavior with highly palatable treats. In addition, clicker training may be a useful technique to mark desired behaviors followed by food or other rewards. Interaction with human caregivers should be encouraged with the use of toys when appropriate. Cats should be carefully monitored for behavioral and physical signs of stress. The veterinarian should be apprised of the cat's progress at least twice weekly. Every effort will be made to prevent long term stays (more than a couple of weeks) for cats that remain markedly stressed/fearful and are not responding to treatment/behavioral care. Transfer to foster care, direct adoption, placement as a barn cat or euthanasia (when no other options exist) will be used to minimize stressful shelter stays and ensure cat welfare.

## 6. Documentation

For all feral/feral behaving and special needs behavior cats, a behavioral assessment form will be filled out on a daily basis. The following information will be collected: number of cats entering the shelter as "feral", the designation of these cats after their 5 day holding period (true feral, tame, in between) and the outcome/final disposition for each cat (adopted, TNR, relocated, barn adoption, regular adoption, other).