



The Cat Fanciers' Association, Inc.

“World’s Largest Registry of Pedigreed Cats”

AVMA’s New Position on Free-roaming, Abandoned and Feral Cats A Concern for Cat Lovers?

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) is a not-for-profit association that represents over 69,000 veterinarians. The AVMA acts as the collective voice for its membership and for the veterinary profession¹. They are well respected as the voice of the veterinary community in the United States. The January 15, 2005 AVMA news online announced new policies adopted by the Executive Board on behalf of their membership. The policy was created following the Animal Welfare Committee review of AVMA policies dealing with free roaming, abandoned and feral cats².

On their website the "Animal Welfare Position Statements" include their positions on companion animal and population control³. Some of these positions may be of concern to cat lovers, particularly those involved with the care and management of feral and free roaming cats.

The new AVMA position supports reducing the number of unowned free-roaming cats through capture. However, rather than returning the cats to the environment the new position states that: “All free-roaming abandoned and feral cats that are not in managed colonies should be removed from their environment and treated in the same manner as other abandoned and stray animals in accord with local and state ordinances⁴.” Unfortunately, in most jurisdictions this means that the majority of abandoned and stray animals are held for a minimal period, and then euthanized.

For many years animal welfare groups have advocated trap/neuter/return programs (TNR), with responsible feral colony management, as the appropriate means to humanely control the population of free-roaming cats. “Trap and kill” programs have been found to be ineffective, since cats killed will quickly be replaced⁵. Policies that advocate elimination of unowned/feral cats through trapping and euthanasia have proven to be futile. The existing food attraction and habitat can rarely be changed; therefore, as cats are removed, more arrive to fill the niche⁶.

While not officially opposing managed feral cat colonies⁷, the new AVMA policy statement effectively discourages them. For example, the new policy states that the number of managed colonies is insignificant, and consequently the effect of managed colonies is insignificant⁸.

The new AVMA position statement would also restrict the locations of managed colonies. “The AVMA opposes placement of managed cat colonies on public lands or in any area that could threaten at-risk wildlife or in areas that may pose a zoonotic risk to the public.” In other words, rural areas are inappropriate due to risk to wildlife. Urban settings are inappropriate due to risks to human health. Where does that leave the feral cats? The position also calls for “natural or artificial restrictive barriers” to contain the cats, which may be costly. Bringing large numbers of free roaming cats into a closed environment may increase the risk to the health of the cats.

Ironically, the results of a long term study published in the AVMA’s own Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, seems contrary to their new position statement. The study followed feral cats on the University of Central Florida campus over a period of over 10 years. An aggressive program of trap-neuter-return-

manage was implemented. This long-term TNR program achieved a dramatic reduction in the feral cat population through sterilization, attrition, and an aggressive adoption program. This is directly contrary to the AVMA position that any positive effects would be “insignificant.” By the end of the study period there had been a nearly 50% drop in the number of free roaming cats. The study’s conclusion: “A comprehensive long-term program of neutering followed by adoption or return to the resident colony can result in reduction of free-roaming cat populations in urban areas⁹.”

Other groups have found TNR to be effective in dealing with free-roaming cats as well. One such project was in Maricopa County, Arizona, a community with a combined human population in excess of 3 million. The program, called the “Maddie’s Pet Rescue Project” was so successful that the County Board of supervisors issued a resolution stating: “Maricopa County Board of Supervisors does hereby endorse non-lethal trap-neuter-return, when accompanied by ongoing feral cat management, as the most effective, humane method of controlling feral cat populations in Maricopa County and in so doing better provides for the welfare of these animals while better serving our communities’ public health and safety concerns¹⁰.” As put succinctly by the Alley Cat Allies: “TNR works¹¹.”

The AVMA position supports law that would penalize people who feed stray cats. They ask for enforcement of state and local ordinances which would: “Prohibit public feeding of intact free-roaming abandoned and feral cats¹².” Advocating laws criminalizing the humane feeding of stray cats, coupled with enforcement of these ordinances, would certainly act as a deterrent to caring people who might otherwise provide care for these unfortunate cats. Feeding feral cats is the first step toward trapping and neutering.

Another thrust of the AVMA position on feral and free roaming cats is enforcement of legislation that would: “Require licensing, rabies vaccination, and permanent animal identification through microchipping of all cats¹³.” The financial benefit to veterinarians from government-mandated vaccinations, microchipping, and other required veterinary services is clear. Surgical sterilization, rabies vaccination, microchipping or other requirements ensure a visit to the veterinarian to comply with the law. Annual relicensing, with proof of revaccination, provides an ongoing source of revenue for some veterinary practices. In essence, penal laws would be used to promote private veterinary practices. But the statement fails to suggest how this might in any way benefit the free roaming, abandoned and feral cats the policy is intended to protect.

Cat licensing in particular has been found to be ineffective in reducing the number of free-roaming cats in the community. The San Francisco SPCA position statement notes that: “...it seems apparent that cat licensing will only work to increase, not decrease, the number of homeless cats.” The risk of criminal fines and penalties may cause feral cat caretakers to “surrender their animals to the local shelter or abandon them to fend for themselves. ... Of course, for the stray and abandoned cats already in the community, licensing will do nothing¹⁴.”

The Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) has actively promoted appreciation of all cats as special creatures deserving respect and lifetime care regardless of whether they are "owned" or not¹⁵. CFA supports programs involving trapping unowned cats, testing for diseases, euthanasia of unhealthy/suffering cats, vaccination, altering, placement for adoption if possible, ear identification and return to existing locations where ongoing caregiver management and protection will be provided. CFA opposes measures such as caregiver registration and licensing, cat licensing, fines or other punitive measures because they tend to discourage otherwise caring individuals from coming to the aid of unowned/feral cats¹⁶. Mandatory cat licensing is not directed to improving the lives of feral and free roaming cats. However, this all adds expense, and could lead to abandonment.

“Trap and kill” programs have proven to be ineffective in controlling the free roaming cat problem. However, TNR programs work best in conjunction with low cost or no cost spay and neuter programs in the community. The presence of a successful low cost spay and neuter program makes price comparisons for these basic veterinary services inevitable, and can create a downward pressure on prices private veterinarians can charge in a given market. However, voucher programs that allow consumers to select their own veterinarian helps cat owners obtain proper care without excessive government interference with private veterinary practice.

What can you do to help? Please remember that the position taken by a large professional association is sometimes influenced by financial impact on the profession. The views of a large organization may not reflect the views of each and every member of the organization. Ask your veterinarian if he or she is a member of the AVMA. If so, ask them if they are aware of the position the organization has taken on their behalf.

¹ <http://www.avma.org/membshp/about.asp>

² <http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/jan05/050115i.asp>

³ <http://www.avma.org/policies/animalwelfare.asp#companion>

⁴ Id.

⁵ “A Report on Trap/Alter/Release Programs” Karen Johnson (<http://www.feralcat.com/feral-tr.html>)

⁶ CFA Guidance Statement on Feral Cats, unanimously adopted by the CFA Board, February 7-8, 1998

⁷ “The AVMA neither endorses nor opposes appropriately managed cat colony programs.”

⁸ “An insignificant percentage of the total number of unowned free-roaming and feral cats are being managed by humane organizations. Consequently, the reduction in the total number of free-roaming cats these programs will effect is insignificant.”

⁹ “Evaluation of the effect of a long-term trap-neuter-return and adoption program on a free-roaming cat population” Julie K.

Levy, DVM, PhD, DACVIM; David W. Gale; Leslie A. Gale, BS, JAVMA, Vol 222, No. 1, January 1, 2003.

¹⁰ Unanimous Resolution of the Maricopa County, AZ, Board of Supervisors, September 2002

¹¹ <http://www.alleycat.org/visitor.html#2>

¹² Id.

¹³ <http://www.avma.org/policies/animalwelfare.asp#companion>

¹⁴ “Cat Licensing: Analysis of Claims” San Francisco SPCA Position Statement, January 3, 1995

¹⁵ CFA Guidance Statement on Feral Cats, supra

¹⁶ Id.

CFA ONLINE RESOURCES REGARDING FERAL CATS

- Cat Facts: TTVARM Program <<http://www.cfa.org/articles/trap.html>>
- Cat Facts: Spay & Neuter Programs <<http://www.cfa.org/articles/spay-neuter.html>>
- “Cat Licensing: Analysis of Claims” San Francisco SPCA Position Statement, January 3, 1995 <<http://www.cfa.org/articles/sfspca.html>>
- CFA Guidance Statement on Feral Cats <<http://www.cfa.org/articles/feral-cats.html>>
- TTVARM Programs <<http://www.cfa.org/articles/trap-alter-release.html>>

LINKS TO SELECTED FERAL CAT RESOURCES ONLINE

- Alley Cat Allies <<http://www.alleycat.org/>>
- Feral Cat Coalition <<http://www.feralcat.com/>>
- Maddies Fund <http://www.maddiesfund.org/help/feral_cats.html>
- National Pet Alliance <<http://www.fanciers.com/npa/ttvar.html>>

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To correspond with the CFA Legislative Committee, please email Legislation@CFA.org