

TNR: An ACO's Perspective

Many animal control agencies in communities throughout the United States are embracing feral cat Trap-Neuter-Return (“TNR”) programs to improve animal welfare, reduce the death rate, and meet obligations to public welfare and neighborhood tranquility demanded by local governments.

A San Francisco shelter survey, for example, found that 75% of all kittens turned into the City’s animal control facility came from feral moms. In response, a pilot program between the City’s Animal Care & Control agency (“ACC”) and the San Francisco SPCA required ACC to forward all feral cat complaints to the private SPCA to allow feral cat advocates up to two weeks to reach a consensus with the parties for adoption of a non-lethal TNR alternative. The program was immediately successful, resulting in less impounds, less killing and reduced public complaints.

From 1993 to 2000, feral cat deaths in San Francisco’s animal control shelter declined 73%, and neonatal kitten deaths declined 81% citywide. Put simply, it would not have been possible to reduce the death rate appreciably, reduce field impounds, and reduce cat complaint calls without a TNR program.

In Tompkins County (NY), an agreement with county officials and the health department’s rabies control division provided for TNR as an acceptable complaint, nuisance and rabies abatement procedure. In specific cases, the health department paid the SPCA to perform TNR.

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. If possible, volunteers provide long-term care, including food, shelter, and health monitoring.”

While feral cats may be the subject of complaint calls from the public, most callers do not want the cats killed. In communities throughout the United States, public health departments, together with animal control agencies, are seeking effective long-term solutions that respond to the public’s increasing desire to see feral cats treated with humane, non-lethal methods. TNR has proved to be the most effective solution to reducing complaints, improving public health and safety, lowering costs, and increasing lifesaving:

Reduced complaint calls:

- Orange County, Florida: Before implementing TNR, Orange County Animal Services received 175 nuisance complaints a week. After implementing a TNR program, as a result of fewer cats and fewer “nuisance” behaviors associated with the cats that have been resolved by neutering, complaints have dropped dramatically.
- Cape May, New Jersey: Since implementing community-wide TNR procedures in 2001, Animal Control has achieved an 80 percent drop in feral cat complaints.

Cost-effectiveness:

- San Diego, California: In 1992, San Diego Department of Animal Control killed 15,525 cats at a cost of \$121 per cat. That year, the Feral Cat Coalition, a private, volunteer organization, began aggressive spay/neuter programs. By 1998, the number of animals killed each year dropped more than 45 percent, with a potential tax savings of \$859,221.
- Orange County, Florida: Reported savings of \$655,949 over a six year period by neutering rather than killing feral cats.

Public Health Concerns:

- In April 2002, Dr. Julie Levy of the College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Florida, Gainesville, and researchers David and Leslie Gale presented findings of an 11-year study of feral cats. The vast majority of cats were in good physical condition, with only four percent killed for health reasons.
- The Atlantic City (NJ) Health Department approved a TNR program for the Atlantic City Boardwalk, which accommodates 39 million visitors annually. The Health Department credited TNR with helping to “prevent injuries to humans, protect humans from public health and safety risks, and promote a healthy human population.”
- In 1989, the Stanford University Department of Comparative Medicine in conjunction with the Santa Clara Department of Public Health and the Department of Environmental Health & Safety found virtually no health risk from feral cats living in close proximity to humans.

Lifesaving:

- San Francisco, California: Combined statistics from the San Francisco

Department of Animal Care & Control and the San Francisco SPCA show a decline in feral cat deaths of 73% and a decline in neonatal kitten deaths of 81% from 1993-2000, as a result of a citywide TNR initiative. Officials also credited the TNR program with a decline in cat field service pick-ups, “DOAs,” and total cat impounds.

- San Diego, California: The San Diego based Feral Cat Coalition reports statistics from the San Diego Department of Animal Control which show that while the number of cats adopted or claimed by owners has remained fairly constant over the years, there has been a decrease of almost 50% in the number of cats impounded and killed since the advent of a citywide TNR initiative.

So how can animal control agencies exploit the public health, lifesaving, and cost benefits of TNR?

TNR has proved to be the most effective solution to reducing complaints, improving public health and safety, lowering costs and increasing lifesaving.

- Develop a policy citing TNR as the preferred—if not only acceptable—response to feral cat service calls.
- Include saving feral cats in the community definition of No Kill.
- Train staff of the shelter to offer TNR as an alternative to trapping and killing.
- Provide TNR literature in the lobby of shelters,

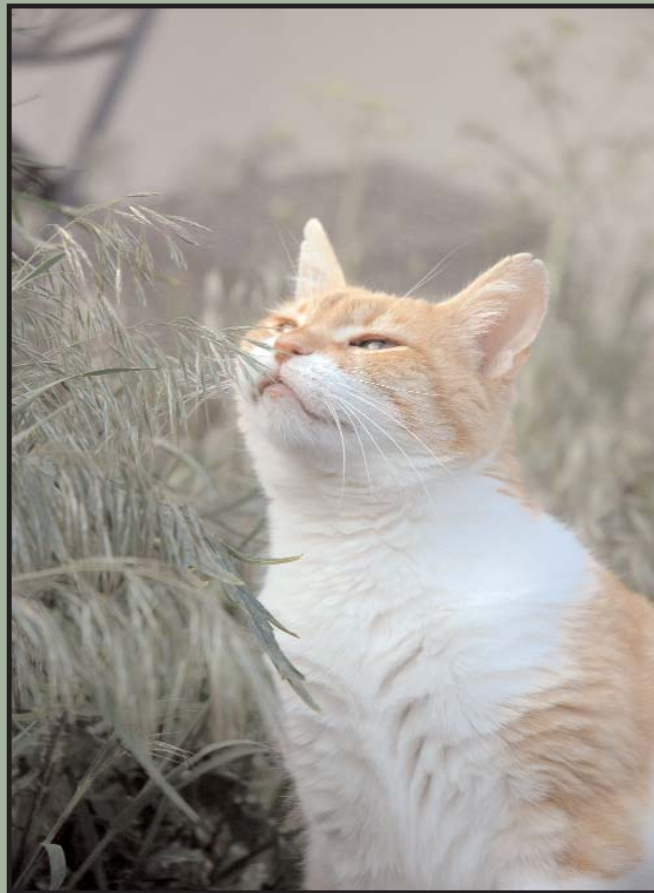


- on websites, and in response to public calls or complaints.
- Allow feral cats to be transferred to feral cat and rescue groups.
- Shelters should transfer feral kittens to feral cat groups for socialization and placement.
- Shelters should place feral kittens into foster care for socializing, and subsequent adoption.
- Meet with feral cat groups to discuss ways to achieve reductions in, and ultimately an end to, the killing of feral cats. An initial program, for example, could require the shelter to contact groups if notched or ear-tipped cats enter the shelter in order to reunite them with their caretakers. A more comprehensive program would include referral of “nuisance” complaints to feral cat groups so that a non-lethal solution can be attempted before animal control intervenes, or the animal control shelter provides non-lethal intervention itself.
- Provide official recognition, and thus advocacy support, to groups encountering neighbor disputes or problems relating to their TNR effort.
- Establish training workshops for individuals on humane trapping, feral cat medical issues, post-surgery recovery care, and other issues to increase the number of feral cat caretakers.

- Do not lend out traps for indiscriminate trapping or for the purpose of removing feral cats to be killed.
- Unless legally obligated to do so, shelters should not accept feral cats except for the purposes of TNR.
- Utilize alternative release sites for feral cats who can no longer safely remain in their habitats.

It is not only humane, but cheaper to neuter a feral cat than to impound, house, feed, kill and then dispose of the feral cat’s body.

- As low- and no-cost spay/neuter programs are put into place, include feral cat TNR in the effort.
- Seek donated food for caretakers.
- Establish a more positive image of feral cats in the community.
- Offer no cost spay/neuter services for feral cats. (It is not only humane, but it is far cheaper to neuter a feral cat than to impound, house, feed, kill and then dispose of the feral cat’s body.)



By establishing a policy preference for TNR, providing training on humane trapping and other aspects of feral cat care, establishing a relationship with community feral cat groups, spaying and neutering rather than killing feral cats, and offering TNR to individuals calling about feral cats, an animal control agency can meet its obligation to public health and safety, and help maintain neighborhood tranquility in a

humane, non-lethal and cost-effective manner.