

The Race To Outpace Feral Cat Overpopulation

**By Linda Kelson,
Feral Cat Coalition Board Member**

Feral and homeless cats are a huge part of the growing pet overpopulation problem everywhere. The number of feral cats in the U.S. has been estimated at 60 million. Ferals are the wild offspring of domestic cats, and ALWAYS the result of pet owners who fail to spay or neuter their animals. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that a pair of breeding cats and their offspring can exponentially produce over 400,000 cats in seven years.

Many people think pets can regain their so-called "natural" instincts and hunt to survive if they are abandoned or lost. The truth is, they can't. Their lives are a grim struggle to survive in back alleys or in rural area on whatever scraps of food they can beg or steal. Unless they are cared for by a feeder, most

die young from disease, starvation, abuse, and accidents – or die violently as food for a predator. The ones that are lucky enough to end up in shelters are usually put to death. Shelters are forced to kill millions of homeless cats each year at a hefty tax bill for citizens, and at an untold emotional burden to shelter workers.

"Trap and kill" programs used in an attempt to solve the problem are expensive, and simply don't work. New cats soon come in to fill the void. The best solution would seem to be a non-breeding population of cats that are fed and looked after by someone. The territorial nature of the cats should keep new cats out of the area. The total number of feral cats would then decrease through natural attrition (and through accompanying public education encouraging the sterilization of pets.)

While most studies have proven that "trap/sterilize/release" programs are the MOST effective in stabilizing feral colonies, most efforts are too small-scale to effectively outpace these prolific breeders.

Most people who find themselves suddenly feeding one or two ferals soon find that they have multiplied to 10 or 20. These otherwise caring people often have limited financial resources, and no access to information regarding the trapping and sterilization of ferals. Where low cost spay/neuter IS available, it is usually cost-prohibitive when more than a few cats are involved. People often try to ignore the problem (in which case it just

gets worse) or they do something drastic, like killing the cats in some desperately inhumane way.

Prior to 1993, the problem with homeless cats in San Diego was reaching crisis proportions. With cats going into heat at four months of age and having two to three litters per year, area shelters were reporting that the number of impounded and euthanized cats were increasing at 15% every year. The resulting costs were enormous.

The Feral Cat Coalition, or "FCC," is an all volunteer, non-profit organization formed by a few veterinarians and other concerned citizens in November 1992. After years of working individually to trap feral cats and sterilize them one at a time by low cost veterinarians, we came to realize that the "cat-by-cat" approach was slow, costly and inefficient. And worst of all, IT JUST WASN'T GETTING US ANYWHERE. The cats were breeding so fast that we couldn't even make a dent in the problem!

When the FCC was formed, we started with one central philosophy: to spay and neuter as many cats as possible, in as short a period as possible, as cheaply as possible, while still providing the best possible care for the cats.

The FCC traps feral and homeless cats, sterilizes them and immunizes them against rabies, and then returns them to the persons who feed them. We do this at NO COST to the public at monthly clinics, in various donated veterinary facilities during off-hours (Saturday afternoons or Sundays). Our first clinic was very small – just 20 cats and one vet, helped by a small number of volunteers (most of whom were also the persons trapping cats). Each month we enlarged our num-

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ber of surgeries as the number of participating vets expanded, the number of volunteers grew, as funds for traps and medical supplies became available. We learned a lot in those first few months. Now after four and a half years, each clinic runs like a well-oiled machine, complete with written instructions for every step of the process.

At every step of the clinic process volunteers and vets are looking for medical conditions needing attention. Many cats get life-saving, or at the very least life-improving surgery, as well as medications to be sent home with the caretaker, as a bonus to the spay/neuter. Cats deemed too ill are humanely euthanized. All medical information for each cat is kept on a Surgery Log from which we compute valuable statistics useful for research and future planning.

Now, after four and a half years we've been able to sterilize over 7,000 cats. The county Department of Animal Control shelters report a decrease of almost 50% in cat impounds and euthanasia since the FCC was formed. Other local shelters report similar declines, sometimes complaining of a shortage of available kittens for adoption. The FCC method works!

The resulting tax savings to the county so far have been substantial – nearly \$1 million that would have been spent to house, feed, euthanize and dispose of impounded stray cats.

One of our goals now is to make it as easy as possible for other communities to start similar

programs. Detailed guidelines are available in printed handouts that include job procedures and forms. These materials are available by mail for just the cost of postage, or downloaded directly off our web-



Courtesy of Feral Cat Coalition.



Courtesy of Feral Cat Coalition.

Top: FCC Clinic cat kept warm and watched closely in I.C.U. Cats also receive fluids if needed. Bottom: Feral cat colony (before trapping). Two cats and their offspring can exponentially produce over 400,000 cats in just seven years.

site. Based on the many thousands of inquires to our website, it's obvious that the desire for workable solutions to the cat overpopulation problem is intense and worldwide. Currently, we're filming a video of our clinics to add to the written materials available, so those interested can actually see the FCC program in action.

Anyone wishing to start a pro-

gram like this first and foremost needs at least one veterinarian willing to volunteer. Some seed money to buy traps and medical supplies and equipment is also necessary. Clinics should start small and increase in size as funds and staff allow. Donations should come from a grateful public. Volunteers come naturally (often from caretakers) as people see the good work and want to share in the great feeling of goodwill and self-empowerment that all FCC volunteers experience.

The Feral Cat Coalition program has accomplished much more than just a win in the continuing cat population race and improved lives for thousands of cats. These clinics promote a close partnership between the veterinary and lay communities, while providing hands-on education to the public about the consequences of irresponsible pet ownership. The FCC has grown to over 350 lay volunteers and over 80 veterinarians because each of them comes away from a clinic with the knowledge that problems which may at first seem insurmountable CAN be solved if WE are part of the solution, and that

each one of us CAN make a substantial contribution to a more compassionate world.

For more information, visit our FCC website at www.feralcat.com, or write to us at:

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