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Colonies of Free-Roaming Abandoned and Feral Cats Approved by the VVMA Executive Board 5/4/05

We recognize that this issue is complex, and carries a high emotional charge for many. The following is the position statement of the VVMA on colonies of free-roaming, abandoned, and feral cats. 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. People who feed cats in colonies feel that they are doing good for the cats, but in reality the quality of life for these cats, in terms of their medical care, is often far below an acceptable standard for pet cats.

We feel that it is in cats' best interest to be loved, fed, and provided with medical care by their owners, and usually to live at least partly, if not completely, indoors. Cat group numbers should be small enough that owners can afford to provide each cat with the personal attention and medical care that it needs.

We do not feel that feral cat colonies are a good idea for the colony cats, for other pet cats, or for humans or local wildlife. Feral cat colonies can serve as reservoirs of feline or human diseases. They can contribute to the pet overpopulation problem. Even if well fed, cats may kill local wildlife, such as songbirds. Finally, the colony members themselves are not getting good medical care.

Cats have the ability to exist as wild animals, 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 compassionate 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.

In recent years, 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 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 existing colony should be managed with the goal of eventual reduction of the cat population to zero.
3. Each colony should be well-managed, with designated human caretakers to track population, individual cats, and medical care.
4. Each cat should be humanely trapped. Cats should undergo a complete medical evaluation by a veterinarian, including testing for FELV and FIV. Viral-positive cats or cats who are in poor health should be humanely euthanized. Cats who are sufficiently socialized to humans should be adopted out to caring homes through shelter channels. Cats who are to be returned to the colony should be vaccinated against FELV, rabies, panleukopenia, feline herpesvirus-1, and calicivirus; sterilized; and marked by ear tipping.
6. 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.
7. 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 official managed colonies should be removed and treated according to local ordinances.
8. We recognize the need for and support public education concerning the causes of cat abandonment and the potential negative impacts of free-roaming cat colonies on the health and well-being of humans and felines.

This document was prepared in May, 2005, using the current cat colony position statements of the AAFP, HSUS, and AVMA.