

ISSUE BRIEFING PAPER

ISSUE: Management of feral cat colonies & Trap, Neuter, and Release (TNR) Programs

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STAFF CONTACT: Richard Heilbrun, TPWD Conservation Outreach Program Coordinator (210) 688-6447, Richard.Heilbrun@tpwd.texas.gov

COMMUNICATION GUIDANCE: This document is intended to provide information to the public, municipal or governing organizations, and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) staff regarding the management of local feral cat populations and the efficacy of Trap, Neuter, and Release (TNR) programs.

BACKGROUND: Municipalities are often asked to mediate public debate on the issue of managing feral cat populations and provide solutions to address the conflicting priorities of different stakeholders within a community. TNR programs are sometimes suggested as a humane way to address public concerns about the threats feral and free-roaming cats pose. TPWD provides this objective, science-based statement to organizations and governments tasked with balancing the needs of feral and free-roaming cats, public health, and local ecosystem health.

TPWD POSITION: Feral (non-owned) and free-roaming cats pose a direct threat to the health of our natural resources. Feral cat colonies negatively impact songbirds, small mammals, amphibians, and other native wildlife populations. Feeding programs are not recommended because they concentrate cats and wild animals into single areas, which can increase disease transmission and pose greater threats to native wildlife in the area. Neither intentional feeding of free-roaming cats or the sanctioning of managed cat colonies addresses ecological, animal health, or public health concerns, nor does it address population control.^{1,2} Additionally, TNR programs are not effective at alleviating the threats of feral and free-roaming cat colonies on feline health, human health or native wildlife populations. Sterilization programs are ineffective in managing feral and free-roaming cat populations,³ and do not address the ecological impacts that these cat populations can have on our natural resources.^{4,1} For these reasons, which are explained in detail below, TPWD does not support the creation or perpetuation of feral or free-roaming cat colonies or feeding, sterilization, or Trap, Neuter, and Release programs.

KEY INFORMATION:

- **ECOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON WILDLIFE:** Because hunting is a deeply instinctive behavior of cats, even well-fed cats will prey on native wildlife.⁵ They prey on native species, especially impacting declining, rare, or sensitive populations, including birds, reptiles, and mammals. Domestic and feral cats are not native predators in Texas, and their hunting behaviors disrupt natural ecological processes. Feral and free-roaming cats alter the ecological balance of a region, as does any other feral non-native (exotic) animal. Feral cats' diets have been shown to consist of 69 percent mammal (including native voles, rabbits, and mice), 24 percent birds, and around 5 percent reptiles/amphibians.⁶ Scientific research shows that free-roaming domestic cats kill between 1.4–3.7 billion birds and 6.9–20.7 billion mammals annually and that free-roaming cats are likely the single greatest source of anthropogenic

(human caused) mortality for US birds and mammals.^{7,8} Studies have also shown that food provisions from colonies attract immigrating cats and other wildlife species,^{9,10} and that native wildlife closest to feeding stations are at the greatest risk of depredation by feral cats.¹¹ This is of particular concern when managed cat colonies are located in sensitive or particularly diverse natural areas.

- **PUBLIC HEALTH EFFECTS.** Rabies in cats is more than twice as common as in dogs or cattle,¹² and cats are the domestic animal most commonly reported rabid.¹⁰ Zoonotic diseases and their agents known to be associated with cats include rabies, toxoplasmosis (*Toxoplasma gondii*), cat scratch disease (*Bartonella spp.*), roundworm (*Toxocara cati*), ringworm (*Microsporum canis*), cryptosporidiosis (*Cryptosporidium spp.*), campylobacteriosis (*Campylobacter spp.*), plague (*Yersina pestis*), *Cheyletiella* mites, and tularemia (*Francisella tularensis*).¹³ Feeding stations intended for cats actually attract a variety of animals such as rats, raccoons, skunks, opossums, and foxes, putting these animals in unusually close contact with humans, cats, and each other. This close contact increases the risk of contracting and spreading diseases, including rabies, to other wildlife, cats, and humans.^{14,2}
- **HEALTH OF INDIVIDUAL CATS.** Wild and free-roaming cats lead a stressful life. Diseases, depredation, and accidental or intentional injuries significantly decrease the quality of life for feral and free-roaming cats, even if municipal staff or volunteers have the resources to intensively manage a colony. In addition to the zoonotic diseases listed above, several diseases commonly found in cat colonies impact the health of cats, including rabies, feline leukemia, feline immunodeficiency virus, roundworm, ringworm, fleas, ticks, ear mites, abscesses, respiratory infections, urinary tract infections, and eye infections. Some of these maladies are incurable, and others require multiple treatments or vaccinations. Cats that have been previously trapped to administer medical treatment often become shy of traps and are difficult to trap again for immunization or continued treatment for illness or injury. Feral cats are also particularly vulnerable to vehicle impacts, injury, and depredation by native wildlife.² Cat colonies lead to a stressful, painful and unhealthy existence for individual cats within a colony.
- **EFFICACY OF TNR PROGRAMS.** TNR programs are ineffective. Managers of these programs cannot prevent new cats from being added to a population, and they cannot neuter the vast majority (70% to 90%) of the population, both of which are required assumptions for population reduction.^{9,15} TNR programs repeatedly fail to eliminate or control cat colonies due to ongoing cat immigration from surrounding areas.⁹ Scientifically vetted studies have demonstrated that TNR programs do not prevent overpopulation of feral cats, reduce population size over time, prevent losses to native wildlife, or prevent disease transmission.^{15,16,17,18,19,20, 21,22}

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- ¹⁴ The Wildlife Society’s Final Position Statement on Feral and Free-Ranging Domestic Cats, 2011. <http://joomla.wildlife.org/documents/positionstatements/28-Feral%20&%20Free%20Ranging%20Cats>
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¹⁸ Castillo, D and AL Clarke. 2003. Trap/neuter/release methods ineffective in controlling domestic cat "colonies" on public lands. *Natural Areas Journal* 23:247-253.

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