

County of Santa Clara Department of Agriculture and Environmental Management

Boards and Commissions
Animal Advisory Commission




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DATE: May 11, 2011

TO: Supervisor Mike Wasserman, Chairperson
Supervisor Liz Kniss, Vice Chair
Housing, Land Use, Environment, & Transportation Committee (HLUET)

FROM: 
Kevin O'Day
Director of Agriculture & Environmental Management

SUBJECT: Request from Animal Advisory Commission Regarding Proposed Spay/Neuter
Program Budget Reduction

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Do not reduce the Spay/Neuter Program budget.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

Reducing the funds available to spay and neuter cats is a false economy. Shelter cat intakes will increase, resulting in higher shelter expenses to house and euthanize the cats.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

Unpaid citizens have been volunteering for years to help the County reduce the number of cats entering the shelters, thereby lowering the rate of euthanasia. These volunteers spend

countless hours and much money out of their own pockets to help reduce the number of unsterilized, free-roaming cats. The Spay/Neuter Program helps pay for surgery to render the cats sterile, helping to reduce the monetary burden of the volunteer, and allowing for even more cats to be altered.

Additionally, the proposed breed-specific legislation, currently being presented to the Board of Supervisors, also recommends increasing the fund in order to spay and neuter more large dogs as a public safety measure. If this dog proposal is accepted, there will be even fewer dollars available for cat spay/neuter.

San Jose's March 2011 report on their increased efforts to spay/neuter and return every feral cat presented at the shelter for the past year, shows an overall 44% reduction in cat euthanasia. Additionally, there was a 16% reduction in health-related euthanasia, and an 81% reduction in behavior-related euthanasia.

Santa Clara County Animal Services data shows the cost to house, euthanize, and dispose of a feral cat is \$113. The reimbursement rate of the County to participating veterinarians to alter the same cat is \$45.

BACKGROUND

There are an estimated 125,000 unowned cats in this county, fed by caring people yet not claimed to be owned. Most of these cats are found in residential neighborhoods, yet others are found in office complexes, shopping centers and parks. A high percentage of these unowned cats are feral. The definition of a feral cat is one that does not readily allow human touch. These cats are trapped, spayed or neutered, then returned (TNR) to their home territory. A 1993 study of the Santa Clara County dog and cat population found that unowned cats were 41% of the known cat population.

Feral cats live where they find shelter and food resources. The primary food supply for cats not being actively fed by a caretaker is human garbage from trash bins as this is the easiest and most prevalent food source. They may also eat rodents, reptiles, insects, and to a lesser degree, birds. Scientific studies show that feral cats will pursue prey that requires the least energy to catch, which are small animals other than birds that simply fly away when chased. Cats found in neighborhoods will also eat from dishes left outside for dogs and owned cats. If a cat colony is found in an area, there is obviously a food source there to sustain them. Cats are territorial and will, therefore, stake their territory and may fight with some other cats that try to join them.

If cats are removed from an area where they are thriving on a food source, other cats that may have been prevented from joining the colony will quickly move in to the newly available feeding grounds. This is the scientifically documented "vacuum effect" evident in all wild animal territories. This leads to a never-ending cycle of trapping and removing cats.

Unaltered cats have an average of 2.1 litters per year, consisting of 4.25 kittens. Among the unowned cats, up to 65% of their offspring will perish before reaching reproductive age, due to disease, genetic problems, accidents or lack of medical care. Those that survive are healthy and will begin their reproductive cycles as early as six months of age, depending upon the time of the year. Female cat reproduction is based on the number of hours of light in a day. This is why we see the huge number of kittens entering the shelter in the late spring through late fall every year, known as "kitten season".

The primary shelter cat intake at Humane Society Silicon Valley (HSSV) has historically been feral cats and/or their unweaned offspring. The number of cats entering the shelters at HSSV through the 80's increased approximately 6% per year until the break-up of animal control services in 1992, and the beginning of the San Jose Free Spay/Neuter Voucher Program in 1994. The County's Low-Cost Spay/Neuter Program, implemented in 1999, contributed to further reducing shelter cat intakes. In both programs, the funds were used primarily to alter feral cats. (See the attached chart)

Substantial decreases in shelter cat intakes were noted within two years of the start of the San Jose Voucher Program despite increases in the human population. After 10 years, cat intakes had decreased 25%, saving millions of dollars in animal control costs, and despite the increase in the human population.

TNR is a method in which feral cats are trapped, taken to a veterinary clinic for sterilization, vaccinated, medically treated as necessary and returned to the same location to live out their lives. In a properly managed colony, a caretaker will visit the cats on a daily basis to supply new food and water, and monitor for new arrivals or kittens. The altered cats have an ear notched during surgery, so anyone can easily see if the cat has already been sterilized or not. Tame stray cats and kittens under four months of age are removed for socialization and adoption into a new home. The remainder live out their natural lives, and through attrition, the numbers gradually decrease. If the surrounding area also has active TNR, there will be no additional cats looking for new habitat and food resources.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE ACTION

Citizen volunteers will have less incentive to trap and alter stray cats. Unowned cats will reproduce, dramatically increasing the number of cats and kittens entering the shelter in a very short time. This, in turn, will cause space problems and a higher euthanasia rate in order to house the increased number of cats.

STEPS FOLLOWING APPROVAL

Notify the Animal Advisory Commission of HLUET's action.

ATTACHMENTS

- HSSV/SJ/SVACA Cat Intakes 1982-2009