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## Free-Roaming and Feral Cats

Cats are domesticated animals that are not indigenous wildlife in North America. However, over the years some pet cats have been abandoned and become **“feral.”** Feral animals are domestic animal species living in an unsocialized or wild state; they are one or more generations removed from a home environment. Feral cats may live in a group or “colony”, usually in an area where they find food and shelter.

**“Free-roaming”** cats are those that are not necessarily known or considered to be feral, but which frequently roam outdoors and interact with feral cats and wildlife. They may be “outdoor cats” with a specific owner, or may have originated in one household and are now fed or housed by other households in the neighborhood.

Given the relatively high rate of spaying and neutering of owned cats, free-roaming and feral cats are the primary source of cat over-population. It is estimated that the number of free-roaming and feral cats in the United States may be equal to that of owned cats, approximately 70 million. If left unchecked, free-roaming and feral cats will breed and their populations increase at locations where they find suitable shelter and food, resulting in environmental/property damage, and public nuisance. Feral and free-roaming cats will hunt and kill birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish, resulting in wildlife mortality.

Pet cats that are abandoned will not easily fend for themselves outdoors. Unfortunately, most of these cats and their offspring will suffer premature mortality (death) from disease, starvation, or trauma. Many New Jersey animal shelters have difficulty dealing with the large numbers of feral cats that they capture or receive, because most of them are unsocialized, hard to handle and therefore, not able to be adopted into homes.

Free-roaming and feral cats also pose a low but important threat to human health. Zoonotic diseases (diseases that can be transmitted from animals to people) include rabies, toxoplasmosis, ringworm, cat scratch disease and many other diseases. Human injuries (bites and scratches) often occur if feral cats are handled without proper precautions.

The solution to the free-roaming and feral cat situation is multifaceted and includes:

- Public education to prevent abandonment of cats and to encourage responsible pet ownership, spaying and neutering, keeping cats indoors, and preventing or solving behavior problems leading to abandonment.
- Effective municipal animal control,
- Establishing managed cat colonies in appropriate areas (see below), and

- Prohibiting the feeding of free-roaming cats outside of managed cat colonies.

**Managed cat colonies** require a designated caretaker and a group of dependable volunteers to care for the animals on a regular basis. Spaying and neutering the cats will stabilize the population of the colony, and the colony size will eventually be reduced through attrition. Any cats which may be newly abandoned or dropped off should be transported to the nearest animal shelter for holding and potential adoption or claiming by owners. Cats that appear ill or injured should be captured and given medical treatment. Colonies must be established in cooperation with the local animal control and health agencies, wildlife organizations, humane groups and veterinarians. They should not be established in areas where at-risk wildlife populations could be threatened or where they may pose a nuisance or zoonotic disease risk to the public. The operation of the colony must comply with all local ordinances and receive landowner permission.

**Trap, neuter and return (TNR)** is the non-lethal population control technique utilized in managed cat colonies to humanely capture, vaccinate, identify, and spay or neuter (sterilize) cats. Kittens and cats that are tame enough to be adopted should be sterilized and placed into homes. Adult cats are returned to the colony where they live out their lives under the supervision of the colony caretakers and other community volunteers. Cats will need to be re-trapped periodically to update their vaccinations and receive medical care.

The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (NJDHSS) defers to local officials to determine the appropriateness of allowing a managed cat colony at a site within a municipality. Municipalities considering managed cat colonies are encouraged to develop standards through ordinance or their regulatory authority to insure these recommendations are developed in a manner that provides an organized community program with proper oversight and accountability.

**State Law and managed cat colonies/ impounding cats:** With respect to State statutes regarding the impounding of stray animals (N.J.S.A. 4:19-15.16), NJDHSS would consider a managed cat colony *as described above* to be 'on the property of the owner' and thus not falling under the category of "stray" animals to be impounded. However, if managed colony cats begin to create a nuisance or public health threat, a re-evaluation should be conducted. The managed colony should be discontinued if solutions to such problems are unable to be instituted.

All other categories of free-roaming cats would fall under the above statute, be considered "stray" and be eligible for impoundment. When an animal control officer is trapping or removing stray cats, it is highly recommended that they notify neighbors about impending action and ask that they keep their cats inside during the trapping period, or ensure their cat's identification with a collar or a name band. Additionally, the telephone number of the animal control officer and/or the holding facility should be provided for nearby cat owners to call if their animals are missing after the trapping.

There is a list of references on this subject listed in the "[Useful Links](#)" section of this webpage.