

## **Shelter proposes trap, neuter, release for feral cats**

**By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter**

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LAS CRUCES -- Green eyes gleamed from a ball of black, semi-fluffy fur huddled uncertainly at the back of a stainless steel cage.

An animal shelter staffer opened the door and stretched out a test hand -- a wooden stick outfitted with a rubber human hand -- to pet the cat. The feline screeched and rapidly swiped a clawed paw.

Shelter officials say the behavior is a sign the cat is feral. And because of that, it will be euthanized to make room for more adoptable ones.

In all, the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla killed about 1,700 feral cats in 2009 -- making up about one-third of all cats euthanized, said shelter director Beth Vesco-Mock. Another 500 euthanized cats were considered excessively timid and may have also been feral.

It's a situation Vesco-Mock said will have to change if Doña Ana County ever wants to reach a goal of becoming a no-kill county for pets. She said that's why she's recommending the county and city of Las Cruces adopt ordinances allowing feral cats to be trapped, neutered and released back into the outdoors under certain conditions. She pitched the idea to county commissioners in January, and she'll address city councilors in February.

The proposal is sure to be controversial.

### **Trapping cats**

A volunteer group has been operating a trap-neuter-release program on the main campus of New Mexico State University since 2002.

At the start, it estimated 200 to 250 feral cats roamed the campus, said Michelle Corella, director of the Feral Cat Management Program. Now the population is down to about 75 to 100 cats, she said. Most of the animals have up-to-date vaccinations, regular food and have been spayed or neutered.

In the first year, Corella said, about a dozen litters of kittens were born. But now, she said, litters are infrequent -- one of the group's major successes.

"We've prevented, literally 2,000 to 3,000 kittens from being born," she said.

Those are cats that otherwise would have been trapped by groundskeeping staff, sent to the shelter and likely euthanized.

Vesco-Mock said simply trapping the cats and removing them from an area creates a "vacuum" that's eventually filled by other cats.

Corella said her group backs measures that would allow the expansion of trap-neuter-release programs. She said they're one of the best ways to humanely deal with an excessive feral cat population countywide.

"It would be a wonderful option for people who are not really on board with the idea of hauling these cats off to the shelter and killing them," she said. "These animals have a right to live. They didn't ask to be born. They didn't ask to be a feral cat."

### **Wildlife woes**

But some wildlife advocates have spoken out against trap-neuter-release ordinances locally.

"We've talked about this as a chapter, we'd be opposed to any kind of ordinance that would allow it or recognize it or promote it," said David Griffin, president of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society.

The problem, Griffin said, is the "sheer impact" wandering cats have on native wildlife. He noted that outdoor felines -- whether feral or someone's pet -- prey on birds and lizards, even if they have a steady supply of cat food.

Indeed, Griffin noted, feral cats are so prolific because they're often fed by people. And that makes them a subsidized predator in the local ecology.

"If you make it that much easier for an organism to survive, it's just going to give it that more of an edge," he said. "They're an invasive, nonnative predator, and they shouldn't be in those systems."

Griffin said the situation is difficult because no one wants the cats to be euthanized. But authorizing a trap-neuter-release measure, he said, would take resources and attention away from enforcing existing rules, which prohibit stray cats.

## **Ordinance proposed**

Even before Vesco-Mock's recommendation, county animal control officials had been drafting an ordinance. The first reading is likely to reach the county commission in late February or early March.

Doña Ana County Animal Control Supervisor Curtis Childress said it would authorize trap-neuter-release under specific conditions.

For instance, Childress said, a resident wanting to launch a program in a neighborhood would have to agree to sponsor a feral cat colony and would apply for a permit.

The sponsor would have to trap cats and pay to have them sterilized, microchipped, vaccinated and fed. The animal's ear would be clipped to show it was part of a permitted feral cat program.

"What we don't want is for it to turn into a legal way of hoarding," Childress said.

Meanwhile, strays not part of a program would still be prohibited, as current county rules state, Childress said.

Vesco-Mock said properly overseeing a feral cat colony would take diligence and could be costly.

"It's a lot of responsibility," she said. "These animals could live 10 to 12 years."

The city of Las Cruces doesn't have a proposal pending.

## **Does it work?**

There's a debate even among animal advocates about whether trap-neuter-release programs are the best way to reduce the number of strays.

Feral cats that are part of a permitted colony still face the hazards of an outdoor life, including being run over by vehicles or getting eaten by predators.

Griffin said there isn't strong scientific evidence to show that the programs work, especially in a "big, open system" like the entire county.

Corella acknowledged her program hasn't carried out a study that would meet scientific standards, but she contended her group's volunteers are well-acquainted with the animals. New cats don't enter the area very often, she said.

Gary Roemer, associate professor with the NMSU wildlife department, said both trapping and euthanizing feral cats, and trapping and neutering cats, have their advantages and disadvantages. To reach the best answer, he said, a study

# LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

should be carried out locally to learn the impacts on the cat population and on wildlife.

Childress said doesn't know if he supports a trap-neuter-release ordinance. But he said he is certain of one thing: "What we're doing now is not working; we've got so many cats."

Corella, too, said something must give.

"Once people realize that what we're doing isn't working and that we're wasting taxpayer money and this is an effective alternative -- to me it's no-brainer," she said. "At least that's my hope."

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## **On the Web**

Feral Cat Management Program: <http://www.nmsu.edu/~fcamp/>

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society: [www.mvaudubon.org](http://www.mvaudubon.org)

Doña Ana County: [www.donaanacounty.org](http://www.donaanacounty.org)