

By Ben Antonius | Daily Republic | March 24, 2009 12:33



FAIRFIELD - One by one, the floppy, unconscious cats moved down the assembly line and into a sterile room where their chances of ever having kittens would end.

By the end of the day, there were 84 small victories in the long fight to tame Solano County's feral cat problem.

An all-volunteer group based in Fairfield has been working for two years on reducing the number of feral cats in the area by trapping wild cats, having them fixed and releasing them. The volunteers are in need of help.

'This gives people another option besides doing nothing and letting the problem get worse or taking them to the shelter where they will be destroyed because they're not adoptable,' said Michelle Bartlett, director of the Solano Feral TNR Task Force.

The approach, called trap-neuter-return, has been used successfully in other communities, but this is Solano County's first shot at bringing colonies of thousands of wild cats under control.

Feral cats are generally seen as a nuisance because they prey on native birds, harass domestic cats, make a racket and clog local animal shelters. The Solano County Animal Shelter receives between 5,000 and 5,500 cats each year, the vast majority of which are euthanized at taxpayers' expense, shelter manager Ron Whitfield said.

'Other agencies (that) have been doing the trap-neuter-return for years have had a pretty good, substantial drop in the number of cats coming in and being euthanized,' Whitfield said.

The approach is more expensive, at least initially, but proponents argue that it has better long-term results than simply exterminating the cats. If an entire colony is euthanized, they argue, nearby cats will overbreed to take over the colony's food and territory.

With the neutering program, the cats are left in place but no longer can have kittens, leaving the colony to die out eventually. Fixing the animals also reduces their urge to fight, mark their territory and make noise during mating season.

'A lot of people think, 'Why should I have to pay for a cat to be fixed that's not mine?' ' Bartlett said. 'Well, they're already paying for these animals. Their tax dollars are going to keeping this shelter up and running. This is giving them an opportunity to have it spent in a humane way.'

The task force conducts about 10 clinics a year at the Solano County Animal Shelter. The cats are trapped a day earlier by volunteers and put under anesthesia. In an assembly line-like process, the cats are given checkups, cleaned, vaccinated and spayed or neutered.

The vaccines and medication are administered by students from the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, other tasks are handled by community volunteers and the surgeries are performed by veterinarians volunteering their time.

'We would like to see more participation from the vets in Solano County,' Bartlett said. 'The problem is most of the vets work Monday through Saturday and we are asking them to give up their one day a week to come in and spay and neuter.'

Several volunteers said they would like the shelter to start offering low-cost spaying and neutering, which would remove the price barrier to people fixing their pets.

Longtime volunteer Mona Lisa Garcia became involved with the program when she moved to Fairfield and realized she lived near a feral cat colony.

'Every time I would go by there, my heart would just sink because I knew they were multiplying,' she said. 'I heard about this program and it was really cheap. They tell you what to do and I ended up trapping all of (the cats) and getting them fixed. It is a great feeling to have.'