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Feral cats may lose county space

By Jeanne Carbone Lewis

Staff Writer

What a difference a year makes. On June 15, 2006 the County of Santa Clara Animal Advisory Commission recommended a policy to Housing, Land Use, Environment and Transportation Committee [HLUET] allowing the trap/neuter/return [TNR] and feeding of stray and feral cats on County-owned property rather than the trap and eradicate. The Board of Supervisors even passed a resolution declaring 2006 the Year of the Homeless Cat and recognized TNR the best method for managing homeless cat colonies.

At the same time HLUET considered a memorandum from the county executive summarizing a staff review of the Animal Advisory Commission draft policy. The memo suggested HLUET consider an “opt-in” policy, utilizing the existing ordinance code provisions and containing some clear prohibitions that some county properties or facilities would not be subject to the policy.

On Jan.18, 2007 County of Santa Clara Department of Agriculture and Environmental Management Director Greg Van Wassenhove recommended to HLUET that establishing a board policy for TNR that allows homeless and abandoned cats to exist on county facilities and properties or to be relocated to alternate county property such as the suggested quarry site was not feasible.

“After careful analysis and collective discussions the staff is not recommending cats at County facilities and properties,” said Agriculture and Environmental Management director Greg Van Wassenhove. “The bottom line is that the county would have the risk and the liability of safety and health of the public, the County and native, threatened and endangered species if they allowed feral cats at county facilities and properties. We’ve had some success with relocating the ferals to farms and ranches and that would continue.”

The HLUET recommendation was based on reports on the County liability conflicts with the safety, health and best interests of the public, the County, County employees or other animal species including native or threatened and



Volunteer Jan Cordes preps a feral cat for spay/neuter surgery. Photo courtesy of HSSV

endangered species.

The report cited the Foster City Program known as Project Bay Cat where feral cats posed a concern by neighbors when excessive debris and rodent population increases were attributed to a feral cat colony along the Bay Trail. Homeless Cat Network [HCN] proceeded with TNR and the monitoring of the cats. In the December 2005 progress report, HCN reported a 29 percent reduction, from 175 to 125 as well as an addition of two abandoned cats and 17 kittens born to unaltered cats. The spay-neuter rate for the colony was reported at 92 percent. The Sequoia Audubon Society stated that the program resulted in fewer cats and that the endangered California Clapper Rail “is thriving and is not impacted by the cats.”

A San Diego study cited reported in a Wild Earth article that free roaming cats near parkland brought home on an average 24 rodents, 15 birds and 17 lizards a years. In 2006, the American Bird Conservancy published a report of a five-state review of threats to endangered species all related to cat predation.

Besides the endangered species impact of feral cats on County properties and facilities, the report mentioned the public health issue that managed colonies are inoculated for feline communicable diseases and parasites that can pass between cats, wildlife and people, concentrated colonies are more likely to become infected.

The County staff recommended not establishing a board policy for TNR that allows homeless and abandoned cats to exist at county facilities and properties or be relocated to an alternative county site.

“The problem is that there were reports written in opposition to the plan instead, despite overwhelming information that TNR works, and eventually reduces the

number of cats,” said Santa Clara County Animal Advisory Commission [SCCAAC] member Karen Johnson. “It also shows no respect for the cats’ lives, and this despite a county spay/neuter program to help fix feral cats, and the county declaring 2006 the year of the feral cat.”



A still photo from HSSV's documentary "Cats without a Home" shows Manager of Animal Care Mike Foltz holding a stray kitten. Photo courtesy of HSSV

Johnson is one of seven members appointed by the board of supervisors to SCCAAC who are interested in animal welfare and work as a liaison.

“2006 was declared the year of the feral and TNR the preferred management,” said Humane Society Silicon Valley [HSSV] President Christine

Benninger. “A good portion of our society thinks of cats as a nuisance. We see cats being abandoned 10-1 over dogs. It is a reflection of our society and how some of us treat other living things. We have the opportunity to be role model and work together to solve the issue. Lots of Bay Area organizations are dealing with feral cats with TNR.”

HSSV estimates there are 125,000 homeless cats in Santa Clara County. Cats represent two-thirds of all animals in shelters and are euthanized at a far greater rate than dogs or rabbits. Santa Clara County shelters euthanize approximately 14,000 cats in 2005 at the cost of approximately 2.4 million dollars.

“TNR is much more humane as well as fiscally responsible,” said HSSV marketing and communications director Laura Fulda. “TNR costs at least five to

one less. And we have volunteers and food donations for the cats.”

HSSV has produced a 30-minute documentary on homeless cats and has shown the film at town hall meetings. A trailer of the film can be accessed as well as further information on TNR on HSSV’s Web site at www.hssv.org.

“Supervisor McHugh deeply cares about life over death,” said District 3 Supervisor Pete McHugh policy aid Mainini Cabute regarding the Jan. 18, 2007 recommended action regarding homeless and abandoned cats on County properties. McHugh is also the HLUET vice chair. “He will be proposing a policy in March with some friendly amendments.”

For more information regarding feral cats call (408) 779-5761 or e-mail towncats@garlic.com.