

We've all seen them, scurrying off into the bushes, hiding under old cars, nursing litters under the deck in the backyard. Feral (wild) cats are a problem in every community. Some areas in town have more than others. Estimates are that California has 3-4 million feral cats, with the numbers undoubtedly growing daily. Most of these cats are truly wild. They have developed hunting and scavenging skills that allow them to live completely independent of humans, though still challenged with diseases and malnutrition. Their increasing numbers pose potential public health and safety issues for people, as well as increased risk of disease transmission to pet cats in the community. While some cats may be domesticated, most feral cats delivered to shelters are euthanized due to their wild nature and incompatibility with human homes. Our own Solano County Animal Control euthanizes 10,000-11,000 animals annually (many are cats) simply because there are no available homes for them. As a veterinarian, committed to animal well being, I find this tragically sad.

Some concerned people, out of sheer pity for these feral felines, will leave food out so they won't go hungry, while others believe that practice only propagates the problem, claiming that a better nourished cat is a more fertile cat. Whatever your position, everyone feels for these little creatures, and wishes for a solution.

The California Veterinary Medical Association has recently announced a program that, while not the end-all to the problem, is certainly step in the right direction

CVMA's Feral Cat Altering Program (FCAP), with the financial support of Maddie's Fund, plans to spay/neuter 60,000 feral cats statewide over the next three years. Maddie's Fund is an independent, private foundation devoted to the welfare of companion animals. It was established in 1994 by Dave and Cheryl Duffield and is dedicated to the memory of their late dog Maddie.

The program works something like this: Concerned volunteers in the community who want to take part in the program will use humane traps to capture feral cats and deliver them to participating veterinarians. The veterinarians will spay or neuter the cat at no charge to the volunteer. The volunteer then returns the cat to the area where it was trapped and releases it. The FCAP program will compensate veterinarians at a standard rate to help defray some of the surgical costs. The FCAP program does not cover any additional procedures, such as vaccinations or leukemia virus testing. Costs for such additional procedures would be the responsibility of the volunteer. Some volunteers may choose to leukemia test and vaccinate the cats they trap in order to reduce the incidence of leukemia virus infection in the feral cat population, as well as protect their own pet cats that may come into contact with these feral cats. This same approach may be used for other infectious diseases such as Upper Respiratory Virus and Rabies. It is important to note that the FCAP program can only pay for the costs for the altering surgery.

Only truly feral cats can be spayed or neutered through this program. The CVMA Feral Cat Altering Program clearly defines a feral cat as one that does not voluntarily accept handling by humans, and must be trapped in order to be delivered to a veterinary hospital. Generally speaking, feral cats are non-owned, non-domesticated, free-roaming cats that generally shun human contact.

Traps used for catching these cats should only be humane traps. Local animal shelters and animal welfare groups (such as the Benicia Vallejo Humane Society and Solano County Friends of Animals) can often be of assistance in obtaining these traps. Contact the CVMA at (800) 655-2862, or visit their web site at [www.cvma.net](http://www.cvma.net) for more information on available traps.

The CVMA hopes a large number of California's veterinarians will sign up and participate in this exciting program. Veterinarian involvement in this program is entirely voluntary though, so check with your vet to see if she/he plans to be involved.

Hopefully, through the generous support of Maddie's fund and the combined efforts of the CVMA, caring volunteers, and practicing veterinarians, this program will help reduce the number of cats euthanized each year at shelters across the state. Surely more will be needed to ultimately solve this tragic problem but FCAP is a major step in the right direction.