

Sunday Column – Déjà vu All Over Again
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The City of Columbus, Georgia is once again facing a bewildering attack on their immensely successful Community Cat Project, funded entirely through a grant from Best Friends Animal Society. Two city council members have called repeatedly for the city to end the program and give the money back.

Columbus was one of just two cities in the United States to receive a three-year grant to fund a large-scale trap-neuter-return (TNR) project. During the 12-month period prior to inception Columbus Animal Care and Control took in 3,401 cats. During the most recent 12-month period intakes dropped by 1,932, a whopping 57% decrease.

Columbus city council members' stated reason for challenging the cat project, ironically, is public safety, specifically concerning rabies. Although the risk is very low, I will concede that, relative to dogs, unowned cats are at increased risk for rabies. And, from my perspective this is the most powerful argument for operating a high-volume TNR program.

According to the Centers for Disease Control rabies in the United States has changed dramatically. In the early 1900s the number of rabies-related human deaths in the U. S. was more than 100 annually. Now that number has declined to no more than one or two per year. Quite literally, you would have about a 27 times greater chance of being killed by lightning strike.

The options regarding feral cat colonies are few. Do nothing is, as always, one option. Under this scenario a colony will not disappear and could, in fact, grow exponentially.

The second response has been the municipal "go to" for decades and that is trap and kill. Even where practiced in earnest this approach has proven futile. It was the method of choice practiced by the City of Columbus prior to the Community Cat Project.

The fault in this method is referred to as the "vacuum effect." This is what happens when any species is permanently removed from a geographic area. The empty habitat attracts members of the species from neighboring areas, who move in to take advantage of the same resources that attracted the first group (primarily shelter and food). In addition, more newborn animals will survive to increase the population to whatever the available resources will support.

In a 2011 comparative study of dog populations in China, scientists determined that controlling dog birth rates (spay/neuter) and increasing dog immunization rates are the most effective methods for controlling rabies. The study noted that the culling rate must be at least 10 times the immunization rate to have an equal effect.

The Best Friends Community Cat Project works with local colony managers to trap cats, spay or neuter them and provide a 3-year rabies vaccine.

The latest concern expressed by our 2 city council members is that the 3-year rabies vaccine is not typically boosted at one year as recommended by the AVMA. To require this booster is logistically and financially burdensome and could have a crippling effect on the program.

Numerous challenge studies have been performed at Kansas State and Cornell Universities and by the USDA. Each study has shown that a single dose of the 3-year rabies vaccine in cats resisted aggressive challenges after 4 years and that cats who received the vaccine still registered adequate levels of antibodies even after 5 years.

Most of us want to see a reduction in unowned cat populations but there is no perfect solution. We are looking for optimal solutions and TNR, when done correctly, stabilizes populations which die out over time, leaving zero cats behind.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.