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# Feral Cat Activist



A Publication of Alley Cat Allies

The Newsletter for Feral Cat Caretakers / Spring 2001

*The following was a talk given by Nathan Winograd for a conference call for feral cat caretakers titled, "It Will Take A Community to Save Their Lives," initiated on January 11, 2001.*

## **IT WILL TAKE A COMMUNITY TO SAVE THEIR LIVES:**

### **Should We Release Feral Cats Who Test Positive for FIV?**

**M**Y NAME IS NATHAN WINOGRAD and for the last several years until very recently, I ran the department of the San Francisco SPCA that handled all the community programs, legislative advocacy, and much of its media relations. The most important program I was responsible for, in my view, was the feral cat program. We altered close to 2,000 cats per year absolutely free. We offered our volunteers a 50 percent discount at the animal hospital for feral cats. We operated an extensive foster care network program that provided 100 percent medical care for the kittens, resulting in a decline in the city-wide death rate for kittens of about 85 percent. We pulled feral cats out of the city pound who were on death row there and re-released them into their habitats, reducing the deaths of feral cats at the city pound by 73 percent. We fought legislative proposals by the Audubon Society and others to round up the cats and kill them — and won.

I am an attorney by profession. Prior to joining the SPCA, I was a criminal prosecutor. And I worked generally on crimes of violence, which included things like assault with a deadly weapon, domestic violence, and cruelty to animals. I have also worked for the Stanford Cat Network, the Palo Alto Humane Society, the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the Greyhound Protection League, and have done projects for a number of other groups including Alley Cat Allies, Farm Sanctuary, and an upcoming project for Best Friends Animal Sanctuary.

That is who I am, and now let's get into FIV and what it means for feral cats.

Should we release cats who test positive — and I say test positive specifically, because we are not talk-

ing about cats who have the disease or even are positive, but cats who test positive and that's a very important distinction. I do not believe it is ethical to kill outwardly healthy cats, and it does not matter whether they are FIV+ or not. While we are going to talk about FIV only, keep in mind that, in the end, I draw the same conclusions about FeLV as FIV — we should not test for it as part of the spay/neuter process as a general rule. We should re-release the cat even if the cat tests positive and shows no symptoms.

First of all, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), as its name implies, is a virus. It is from a family of viruses, called retrovirus, which means they have a specific enzyme that allows them to insert themselves into cellular DNA, and thus do their damage.

Early infection can materialize as mild flu-like symptoms: lethargy, lack of eating, a fever. These tend to be transient, they go away and the cat appears normal. Cats who die "from FIV" actually die from other diseases or secondary infections since the virus suppresses their immune system and thus makes them susceptible to other illnesses. The most common is pneumonia. But cats can get many secondary infections and even neurological problems leading to seizures and death.

The virus is generally transmitted through cat bites and birth. And there are relatively inexpensive tests that are done at the time the cat is brought in for spay/neuter to test for it. It costs the San Francisco SPCA, for example, about \$12 per test kit per cat.

Some studies claim that since birth and cat bites are the most common modes of transmission that FIV is more common where there are large numbers

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of stray cats. However, at the San Francisco SPCA we realized that the incidence rate of positive cats is the SAME for feral cats as it is for the pet cat population; about one and one-half percent to three percent of all cats who are tested.

Now that is a very low number of cats who test positive, and that's the first reason why the expense of testing (\$12 per cat) is not cost-effective. Only about two cats in one hundred will test positive. So you are really spending a lot of resources which could be better spent on things that will impact and improve the lives of cats a lot more than testing.

Last year, for example, we altered approximately 2,000 feral cats. At \$12 per test, we spent \$24,000 on testing for only about 40 incidents of a positive test. \$24,000 could have bought us 369 traps. Or we could have purchased 48,000 pounds of kibble, enough to feed a colony of 20 cats for 31 years. Or we could have sent our feral cat packet — which includes 12 factsheets, on trap-neuter-return (TNR), neonatal kitten care, feral cat advocacy and more — to every shelter and rescue group in the U.S. and still have enough money left over to buy a new car. We could have hired a full-time employee to trap cats five days a week, eight hours a day and bring them into the shelter for spay/neuter. If they caught four cats a day that is an extra 900 cats a year. Or, if you pay \$35 per surgery, you could alter 685 feral cats. From a resource point of view, testing is wasteful.

But there is a further twist to the story because of those 40 cats who test positive, about 20 percent will be false-positive cats. In other words, eight cats will not be FIV+ but will test positive, that's eight dead cats. If you include kittens, you will kill more virus-free cats because the incidence of false-positive tests is higher with kittens under 12 weeks old (they carry the antibodies from their mother without actually having the virus). If I can borrow from the lexicon of my days as a prosecutor, we have sent the innocent to the gas chamber. And that's unforgivable.

Besides wasted funds and false positives, in the end only about ten percent of cats who are infected with FIV actually come down with the disease. Ninety percent — nine out of ten infected cats — will lead completely normal lives. Many will destroy the virus.

So, of our 40 positive cats, eight are false, that leaves 32 infected cats. Of those, 28 will lead com-

pletely normal lives. That leaves us four infected cats, out of 2,000 who may suffer from the disease. We have spent \$24,000 and killed 36 normal, healthy cats to isolate four who are infected and likely to get sick. And, of those four, if we provide good nutrition (high quality kibble which we could purchase with the money we save by not testing) and we monitor the colony, we could treat and care for these cats if, and when, they become symptomatic, which may take years. If they are not symptomatic, they can live a long time.

That last point is important because it goes back to our philosophical starting point: do feral cats lead miserable lives? Or is it OK to be feral? But before I go there, let me anticipate some discussion.

Testing for FIV, the line of thinking goes, is not only about preventing suffering in infected cats, it's also about preventing the spread of the disease. But because the primary modes of transmission of FIV are bites and births, spaying and neutering alone will actually go a long way to prevent the spread of FIV because altering affects both: reducing or eliminating fighting as well as roaming and mating. On top of that, because feral cats develop immunities if they survive kittenhood, cats become more resistant to viral diseases, as time goes by, and FIV is no exception. Which further reduces transmission.

And, in the end, if we take the position that we should kill FIV+ feral cats, while we do not have the same rules for pet cats, aren't we establishing a double standard? Aren't we saying that feral cats are worth less than pet cats? And, it is exactly that type of thinking that all of us have been fighting against for years.

Finally, I want to talk about the life of the feral cat. Ultimately, I do think that the decision of whether we should re-release FIV+ cats back into their colonies, like the question of whether we should test at all, is really an ethical one, and not a medical one (although I am sure that there are veterinarians out there who would crucify me for saying that).

I do not share the point of view that feral cats lead miserable lives. Number one, our experience with over 8,000 cats and hundreds of caretakers is that feral cats often lead long, contented lives. There are risks that street cats face that indoor cats do not. However, ultimately they are no different than other wildlife. Some of these animals do not lead extraor-

dinarily long lives but we would never think about euthanizing them for their own good. Another double standard for feral cats. I believe that feral cats deserve our compassion and protection no matter how long their lives may be. If you share the view that being feral is OK, that life on the street is better than death at the pound, then the ethical conclusion is that if an outwardly healthy cat tests positive ethics demands that we give him a year or two or more living the high life in the sun, while we continue to monitor him as we would any of our cats.

If he should get really sick, and there is a 20 percent chance he doesn't even have the disease and another 90 percent chance that even if he does, he'll fight it off, we can re-trap him and then make the decision about euthanasia. Killing him for his own good because he might get sick months or even years down the road is the same mentality that dominates animal control shelters — kill them now because they might suffer later. That is not what we are about as feral cat lovers and caretakers.

Feral cat advocates have always been the champions of life. FIV+ cats should not suffer the prejudices of the animal control mentality that says death is better than a less than perfect life. Our philosophy has always been live and let live.

I do want to make it clear that if the cat is symptomatic, if the cat is outwardly sick and tests positive, the analysis changes. If the cat tests positive and is showing outward symptoms of the disease, secondary infections such as pneumonia, urinary tract problems, or some other illness, I would not advocate that the cat be released.

To the extent that the caretaker can do so (and it may be easier with all the money we save from not doing mass testing), the caretaker's goal should be to treat the cat as you would a pet cat. See a vet, check the diagnoses, see if he is suffering, and how long the feral cat has to live. If it is his time, euthanasia is appropriate. The Webster's dictionary definition of euthanasia is the killing of an individual animal in a relatively painless way because the animal is suffering — emphasis on suffering — from an incurable disease, for reasons of mercy. That is Webster's dictionary definition of euthanasia. It is also my definition.

If the caretaker cannot do that, a symptomatic cat who is positive will likely deteriorate in the colony.

However, if the symptoms are mild, then the approach should be wait and see. Keep the cat in someone's garage or a spare room or wherever you do recovery to make sure the symptoms are not transient.

What we do as feral cat caretakers and advocates is not easy. But we do it because we care — because we love cats. There is a lot of fear around FIV. And I would encourage you not to let your cats become the innocent victims of that fear. Their lives are too precious. ■

### **DISCUSSION CONTINUES:**

## **Testing/Treatment for FIV+ Feral Cats**

**Julie Levy, D.V.M., Operation Catnip, Gainesville, and the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine:**

I really like Nathan's essay on FIV. I agree with it completely, and he and I have discussed it in the past. There are only a couple of things I would comment on in which my own experience differs from Nathan's.

*The virus is generally transmitted through cat bites and birth.*

FIV is mostly spread by biting. Transmission to kittens is rare, but it does occur. FeLV on the other hand is mostly transmitted to kittens.

*But there is a further twist to the story because of those 40 cats who test positive, about 20 percent will be false-positive cats.*

This is a conservative estimate. False positives may be even higher when testing low risk groups like kittens and females.

*On top of that, because feral cats develop immunities if they survive kittenhood, cats become more resistant to viral diseases, as time goes by, and FIV is no exception.*

Age-related resistance is an FeLV phenomenon, not FIV. Risk of FIV increases with age due to longer time of exposure during life outdoors.

*Many will destroy the virus.*

Sadly, recovery from FIV infection is probably extremely rare, similar to elimination of HIV in people. Once infected, it is fair to say that the cats will remain infected for life. This is in contrast to cats infected with FeLV, who can recover from transient infections. ■