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PAWS Feline Leukemia (FeLV) or Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) Testing Policy

PAWS has decided to stop testing cats for FeLV and FIV. Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) stops the cycle of mating and fighting, which are the primary ways the diseases are spread. Since FeLV is primarily spread from infected mother cats to their kittens, and FIV passes mainly among fighting tomcats through bite wounds, spaying and neutering alone will decrease the spread of these infections.

Our decision was based on financial considerations and the numerous studies and scientific data available as well as the experiences of large feral cat programs such as Operation Catnip in Florida and North Carolina, AZCats (now merged with Altered Tails) in Arizona, and Alley Cat Advocates in Kentucky; among others. Some of the reasons for our decision:

- The cost of testing diverts resources from more effective efforts, especially sterilization.
- A reasonable estimate of a community's stray and feral cat population is approximately 0.5 cats/household. That means our TNR programs have to be massive in scale if there is a reasonable expectation to reduce their overall numbers. Protocols for this goal should focus on providing a minimum standard of care to the maximum number of cats. We must make sure that every penny and every volunteer minute is put to the best possible use. The more cats that we can TNR, the faster we will reach our goal of reducing both infections and unwanted cats. Our point of view is that cats are reproducing in the environment regardless of whether they have a retrovirus or a caregiver.
- The percentage of feral cats infected with either FeLV or FIV is low: three to seven percent are infected with FeLV; about two to five percent with FIV. These percentages are about the same as indoor cats.
- The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) recommends retesting all cats that initially test positive. It is impractical and/or impossible to hold feral cats for the period of time necessary before retesting can occur.
- False positives do occur and a negative test does not necessarily mean that the cat has not been exposed to disease.
- Asymptomatic, infected cats can remain healthy for several years.
- It is unaltered cats, regardless of whether they are from outdoor colonies or private homes, who wander, fight, reproduce, and have the potential to spread disease. Sterilization reduces or eliminates the behaviors which spread disease.
- Removing and euthanizing a cat that tests positive will not necessarily prevent the spread of infection within the colony since the colony's exposure to the virus would already have occurred.
- Exposure does not always mean infection.
- According to a study, most Americans believe it's more humane to let a stray cat live out his life outdoors than to euthanize him, even if they knew the cat would die a traumatic death in two years.