



SFSPCA Handling Conflicts/Collaborating with Neighbors

While most people support the concept of humanely caring for feral cats, conflicts can arise. One of the best ways to prevent conflict is to ensure that cats are spayed or neutered and feeding areas are clean and inconspicuous.

Here are the most common reasons people complain about feral cats and some ideas for addressing their concerns.

- **Attracting or interfering with wild animals.** Feeding colonies can pose issues to the native wildlife and neighbors. Feed cats during the day and pick up any leftover food once the cats have eaten (see feeding instructions below).
- **Too many kittens.** Spaying and neutering the cats in a colony is the best way to manage this. In some cases, feral kittens can be socialized and adopted if they are captured at a young age.
- **Cats use the yard as a litter box.** Caregivers can place litter boxes in their yards and offer to periodically clean a neighbor's yard. Provide neighbors with "Deterring cats from your yard and garden" handout.
- **Spraying, fighting, and howling.** Spaying and neutering quickly reduce or eliminate these behaviors.

Establish a friendly, ongoing discussion, and know your facts. Explain to neighborhood residents what trap-neuter-return (TNR) and colony care entail.

Prepare a small packet of written materials in support of caring for feral cats and deliver it to each of your neighbors. Be sure to include "Deterring cats from your yard and garden". Present the information and interact with others in a calm, reasonable, and professional manner. This way, neighbors know you are knowledgeable, proactive, and aware of their concerns.

Listen closely, ask questions and offer concrete solutions. A person might start out by saying the cats are "bothering" them, but further discussion may reveal

that cat droppings in her flower garden are the specific problem. Providing a litter box and cleaning it regularly can resolve this issue quickly.

Whether or not your neighbors' concerns seem reasonable, it's important to listen respectfully. By asking questions and offering solutions, you can focus on a neighbor's specific concerns rather than their general objection to feral cats. Don't be afraid to brainstorm.

If relations become seriously strained, community-mediation services may be beneficial.

Preempt potential concerns. These are steps you can take that can help avoid many of the common issues with community cat populations.

Clean feeding areas and follow feeding protocols. Keep cat-feeding stations or areas clean and trash free. Do not put out more food than the cats will finish in one meal. Remove what they do not eat after 30 minutes, and clean up the area. Never leave food out overnight, because this can attract unwanted wildlife.

Provide litter-box areas. To keep cats from using neighborhood gardens as litter boxes, build one or more litter boxes or place sand or peat moss in areas for the cats to use as litter. Be sure the litter area is quiet and sheltered. Do not use conventional litter, as it will be ruined in wet weather. Scoop regularly to alleviate odors and keep flies away. Be prepared to scoop more often in hot weather.

Use humane deterrents. There are many safe, low-tech methods to discourage feral cats from hanging out where they are not wanted, such as neighbors' gardens, yards, porches, or vehicles (see "Deterring cats from your yard and garden"). Always offer to provide and apply these methods for neighbors at your expense. If possible, pool resources with other caregivers to cover the cost.

Trap-Neuter-Return. Neighbors are often bothered by

behaviors associated with breeding, such as roaming, fighting, yowling, spraying, and more kittens. Your TNR program will virtually eliminate these behaviors.

Explain the value of TNR programs. TNR is the most humane and effective way to reduce and control feral and free-roaming cat populations. It also eliminates or minimizes many of the behaviors and concerns that people raise about the cats. Be sure to explain that the feral cats are not candidates for adoption and it should not be attempted to trap cats and take them into a shelter. Explain that the feral cats are a part of the ecosystem and that the best way to lessen the nuisance is to have the colony TNRred and use the deterring suggestions for their own yards. In addition, removing feral cats typically does not solve the problem, more cats—probably unneutered—will eventually move back into the area if the established colony is removed.

Maintain colony records. Though you should take every step to prevent neighbors from calling animal control, you should be prepared for the possibility. This is why you should maintain current, accurate health records, including vaccination data and photographs, for all the cats in your colony.

Call us with questions or for advice. We're here for you and for the community cats of San Francisco.