A Public Health Perspective on Stray Cat Management: Keeping Communities Safe & Preventing Disease

Stephanie Carey
Margaret Jahn
Public Health Challenges

- Humane control of feral cats is mutual goal
- Managed cat colonies are not without concern
  - Rabies & zoonotic disease
  - Challenges in trapping/revaccinating
  - Interaction w/wildlife: reservoirs & predation
  - Mixed results in population decline
  - Economic advantages are disputable
  - Doesn’t replace responsible pet ownership
Rabies

• The greatest concern of health officials
• New Jersey data since January 1989
  • 418 rabid cats and 7 rabid dogs\(^1\)
  • 90% of domestic animal rabies cases
  • *All cats should have current vaccination*\(^2\)
• Dog licensing/vaccination
  • Statutory requirement for seven decades
  • Proven to have diminished risk in NJ
  • Once 8000 dogs/year in U.S.

\(^1\) NJDOH 2014
\(^2\) National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians 2011
Rabies

- Potential for risk where people & cats interact
- Every scratch & bite must be assumed to be a potential rabies exposure
- >25,000 cats submitted for rabies diagnosis in U.S. each year
- 38,000 receive rabies PEP in U.S. each year
- Cats account for substantial proportion of PEP
- Extensive investigation and >$2,000 in medical care per person for PEP

1 Blanton et al 2011
2 Chrisian et al 2009
3 Hensley 1998, Moore 2000
4 Shwiff et al 2007
Trapping & Revaccinating

- Initial vaccination is only effective for one year
- Stray cats are susceptible if they are not trapped & revaccinated
- Most cats in colonies are only trapped once in their lifetime
- Many cats in colonies live >6 years, so more than one vaccination is necessary
- Annual trapping rates as low as 10%
- Need accurate census of colonies to determine vaccination rates

1 Richards et al 2006  
2 Levy 2003  
3 Foley et al 2005
Other Zoonotic Diseases

- Concern to cats & humans
- Cat density & proximity to wildlife increases potential
  - Parasites
  - Rickettsial diseases
  - Toxoplasmosis
  - Cat Scratch fever
  - Plague
  - Feline leukemia & FIV

Wildlife: Disease Reservoirs

- Cats are more likely to encounter wildlife\textsuperscript{1}
  - Nocturnal habits
  - Indoor/outdoor presence
- Feeding in colonies puts cats at enhanced risk\textsuperscript{2}
  - Feline Respiratory Disease Complex
- Group feeding provides interface w/reservoirs
  - Florida feral cats & raccoons/oppossums\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1} Little 2011, CDC 2008, Levy 2003, Olson, 2000
\textsuperscript{2} Cohn 2011
\textsuperscript{3} Levy 2003
Wildlife: Predation

• Feral cats are obligate predators
• Can have ecological effects on native species
  • Evidence shows reduced native bird & mammal populations¹
  • Supplemental feeding attracts cats without reducing their hunting behavior²

¹ Baker et al 2008
² Hawkins et al 1999
Other Public Health Concerns

- Nuisances
  - Trespass
  - Litter & debris
  - Feces & urine
  - Spraying/yowling
  - Allergies
  - Non-target species attracted to food
TNR & Population

- Evidence that TNR may not reduce population
  - Adequate sterilization rates are extremely difficult to achieve
  - Cats are relocated from other locations
  - Caregivers may move, get sick and/or become overwhelmed

2 Jones and Downs 2011, Foley et al 2005
Conclusion

• Responsible pet ownership is critical
• Managed colonies -- significant public health risk
• CDC recommends that strays be removed from the community
• First priority is to protect public safety
Reality
Reality

- European Advisory Board on Cat Diseases (ABCD)
Reality