



Curbing Overpopulation in Feral Cats

By Heidi Jeter

With a record 90 million cats living in U.S. homes, it might not seem like feline overpopulation could be a problem. But according to Dr. Julie Levy, a Morris Animal Foundation-funded veterinary scientist, an estimated 70 million homeless cats live in the United States. And this number is probably low. The count includes strays that have been lost or abandoned by owners and also feral cats that were born wild and have never lived in a home.

These cats face tough daily conditions and lack veterinary care and vaccines, so they may contract and spread diseases like panleukopenia and respiratory infections. Also, feral cat populations are tough to control. An unspayed female can have multiple litters each year. That adds up quickly to a lot of unwanted cats.

Dr. Levy heads a program at the University of Florida called Operation Catnip, which provides a monthly free spay-and-neuter day for feral cats. This type of program is called trap-neuter-return (TNR), and the theory behind it is that since sterilized cats can't reproduce, the feral populations will gradually decrease in a humane way. However, TNR programs require funding, community support and many volunteers, including veterinarians, because trapping and transporting cats is costly and labor-intensive. Treating cats in the field would be far more efficient.

With Foundation funding, Dr. Levy tested a sterilization vaccine that targets a hormone in the brain called GnRH. When GnRH is controlled, the cat doesn't produce estrogen or testosterone and becomes temporarily infertile as a result. Even better, veterinary technicians can easily administer the vaccine by injection in the field.

Dr. Levy was thrilled with the results. Over the two-year study, the vaccine prevented pregnancy in 73 percent of female cats. No other nonsurgical methods have shown such a high success rate with only a single treatment.

This vaccine has the potential to help feline welfare agencies throughout the world control feral cat populations in an inexpensive and humane way. That would mean fewer cats struggling for survival on the streets.

Dr. Levy received a 2008-09 grant to continue studying the effects of this vaccine. [Learn more.](#)