

Handling Conflicts with Neighbors

While most people support the concept of humanely caring for feral cats, conflicts can arise. One of the best ways to prevent them 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.

- **Wild animals.** Feed cats during the day and pick up any leftover food once the cats have eaten.
- **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 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.
- **Spraying, fighting and howling.** Neutering quickly reduces or eliminates these behaviors. Regular and sufficient feeding also prevents fighting.

Establish a friendly, ongoing discussion and know your facts.

Explain to residents who live in the cats' neighborhood what trap-neuter-return (TNR) and colony care entails. Describe what a cat fence is and how it works. Make clear that the cats are cared for and pose no health risk. You may find that other neighbors feed the cats and you can combine and schedule your efforts.

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*. Present 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 quell 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 his or her general objection to feral cats. Don't be afraid to brainstorm.

For example, a caregiver's neighbor demanded—without explanation—that she stop feeding cats in the neighborhood. By probing, the caregiver discovered that the neighbor objected to cat footprints on his new car. To keep the peace, she bought her neighbor a car cover and he never complained again.

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

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 that most common concerns people raise the cats. Be sure to explain the ramifications of trapping the cats and taking them to an animal shelter: most will be euthanized since feral cats are not candidates for adoption. In addition, more cats—probably unneutered—will eventually move back into the area.

Preempt Potential Concerns.

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

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.

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 as this can attract unwanted wildlife.

Keep feeding stations and shelters away from problem areas. Cats follow food and shelter. They can be discouraged from climbing on cars or other private property by gradually moving their shelters and feeding stations away from these areas.

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're not wanted, like neighbors' gardens, yards, porches or vehicles. (See *Deterring Cats from Your Yard or 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.

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 of 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.