

Taos Feral Feline Friends

FELV/FIV Testing Policy and Rationale

Background

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) 2005 Report on Feline Retrovirus Testing and Management and the 2004 AAFP Position Statement on Free-Roaming, Abandoned and Feral Cats recommended that “all cats should be tested for infection with feline leukemia virus (FELV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).” Another key recommendation from the 2005 AAFP report was, “A decision for euthanasia should never be made solely on the basis of whether or not a cat is infected.”

Based upon the AAFP positions and the recommendation of its Veterinarian Consultant, Dr. Susanne Felsler, Taos Feral Feline Friends (TFFF), since its formation in June 2004, has performed FELV/FIV testing using the IDEXX Laboratories SNAP test on all cats entering its shelter and on all TNR cats. No otherwise healthy cat was subject to euthanasia merely as a result of a positive SNAP test result. Healthy cats testing positive for either FELV or FIV were retained in isolation at the TFFF shelter and retested using a confirmatory test, such as the IFA test for FELV and the Western Blot for FIV. If infection was confirmed, the cat was considered a candidate for euthanasia unless a suitable permanent adoptive in-door home could be arranged, usually possible for companion cats, but unlikely for feral cats. TNR cats with serious medical problems associated with FELV or FIV, testing positive using the SNAP test, were subject to euthanasia if recommended by the attending veterinarian.

In 2008, the AAFP reviewed the latest epidemiological studies and revised and expanded its recommendations in a new report, the 2008 AAFP Feline Retrovirus Management Guidelines. Studies cited in this report indicate that among otherwise healthy cats, FELV/FIV was no more prevalent in feral cats than in outdoor-accessible pet cats. However, the combined FELV/FIV prevalence rate amongst sick feral cats was 33.4%, nearly eight times higher than the 4.3% prevalence rate of healthy feral cats. Furthermore, specific disease conditions such as cutaneous abscesses and oral inflammation are “... associated with a very high prevalence of FELV/FIV.” The 2008 AAFP report significantly modified its recommendation with respect to FELV/FIV testing by stating that “Testing is optional in feral cat programs.” This is the only explicit exception to the AAFP general recommendation that all cats should be tested for FELV/FIV. The 2008 report reiterates two important recommendations from the prior report:

- 1) A decision for euthanasia should never be based solely on whether or not a cat is FELV/FIV infected;
- 2) Cats infected with FELV, FIV, or both, should be confined indoors to prevent spread to other cats.

Following the release of the 2008 AAFP report, some feline welfare groups announced new FELV/FIV testing policies. The Feral Cat Coalition in its Policy Regarding Testing/Vaccination for FELV/FIV/FIP stated, “the Feral Cat Coalition (FCC) does not routinely test... for FELV, FIP, or FIV. On the other hand, FCC veterinarians do have discretion to request testing and then euthanize any symptomatic animal.” The organization, Neighborhood Cats, stated in an on-line document, Releasing FELV/FIV Positive Cats, that, “We believe if the cat shows no active signs of ill health, they should be released back into their colony regardless of test results. In fact, because we know we will release asymptomatic feral cats no matter what, we don’t test in the first place.”

Changes to TFFF Policies

Effective 1/1/2009, the TFFF Trap, Neuter, and Return (TNR) program will no longer test asymptomatic cats for FELV/FIV. TNR cats with cutaneous lesions, oral inflammation, or any other conditions associated with FELV/FIV, at the discretion of the attending veterinarian, will be tested with the IDEXX SNAP test. If a positive result occurs, the cat will be retested with a second SNAP test from a different test kit batch. The second test will be conducted by the attending veterinarian. If FELV/FIV infection is confirmed, the cat will be subject to euthanasia in most cases.

There is no change to TFFF’s Shelter Program policies: all cats will be tested for FELV/FIV prior to entering the shelter. Cats with confirmed FELV/FIV infections will be retained in isolation at TFFF provided space is available and there is a reasonable chance that a permanent, indoor-only adoptive home can be found; otherwise they will be subject to euthanasia.

Discussion

TFFF is committed to following the recommendations of the AAFP. The new AAFP pronouncement that FELV/FIV is optional for TNR programs triggered a reassessment of our testing policies, resulting in the change outlined above. We believe that the reduced, more selective testing of feral cats is consistent with our mission to prevent the inhumane treatment of cats. Because the FELV/FIV infection rates in healthy feral cats is low, we find merit in the argument of other feline organizations that the risk of not testing and thereby exposing other feral cats to FELV/FIV is minimal and that the resources devoted to testing healthy feral cats for FELV/FIV can be better used for spay/neuter and other TNR-related tasks.

However, symptomatic feral cats, with their corresponding eight-fold increased risk of FELV/FIV infection, pose a material threat to the health of the feral colony and must therefore be tested, and if confirmed infected, cannot be returned to colony. Since the only risk of a cat contracting these serious illnesses is from contact with other infected cats, we believe that allowing sick, infectious cats to do potential harm to otherwise healthy cats is inhumane. We also contend that with respect to the sick, infected cat itself, that a return to a harsh outdoor environment where treatment for its health problems is impractical could also be considered inhumane. Furthermore, the 2008 AAFP report states that FELV/FIV infected cats should not be allowed outdoors. Ideally, such cats would be allowed to live in isolated sanctuaries with other infected cats, but TFFF has no such facilities, nor do we know of other organizations that will

accept our FELV/FIV-positive cats. Euthanasia is the only practical option under these circumstances, and since it is unfortunately necessary, it does not conflict with TFFF's mission to stop unnecessary euthanasia. We must emphasize that euthanasia is rarely used by TFFF. Over the three years, 2006 – 2008, for both Shelter and TNR programs combined, TFFF allowed only 19 occurrences of euthanasia out of 714 cats aided, a rate of 2.7%, far lower than most feline welfare programs.

In conclusion, TFFF has always tried to save cats whether healthy or sick. The AAFP recommendations permit feline welfare organizations to adopt a wide range of practices with respect to testing and euthanasia for shelter and TNR programs. Our revised policies are consistent with the AAFP guidelines and represent the best practical system for dealing with the objectives and unique circumstances under which our Shelter and TNR programs operate.

January 2009