

THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

5410 Grosvenor Lane • Bethesda, MD 20814-2144

Tel: (301) 897-9770 • Fax: (301) 530-2471

E-mail: tws@wildlife.org

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Agriculture Subcommittee
House Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources
General Assembly Building
Capitol Square
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Delegates:

The Wildlife Society would like to express strong opposition to SB 359, a bill that would allow the establishment of trap-neuter-release (TNR) programs in Virginia and which would exempt program participants from legal responsibilities of cat ownership. We are concerned about the effects of implementing trap/neuter/release (TNR) as the accepted method of feral cat control in Virginia because of the serious harm it poses to native wildlife and potential negative effects on human health.

You can find more information about issues regarding feral and free-ranging domestic cats and problems with TNR in the attached position statement and fact sheet issued by The Wildlife Society, a non-profit scientific and educational association of nearly 11,000 professional biologists and managers dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education.

Feral and free-ranging domestic cats are exotic species to North America. Exotic species are recognized as one of the most widespread and serious threats to the integrity of native wildlife populations and natural ecosystems. The impact of domestic cats on wildlife is difficult to quantify. However, a growing body of literature strongly suggests that domestic cats are a significant factor in the mortality of small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Because free-ranging cats often receive food from humans, they can reach population levels that may create areas of abnormally high predation rates on wildlife. Even conservative estimates suggest that the number of prey animals killed is immense. Feeding cats does not deter them from killing wildlife because they do not always eat what they kill. Humans introduced cats to North America, and humans must be responsible for their control and removal from the wild.

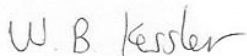
Life outdoors is also dangerous for individual cats. Free-ranging and feral cats are at risk for early death or serious injury due to diseases, cars, poisons, and predators such as dogs and coyotes. Outdoor cats typically live less than five years, whereas cats kept exclusively indoors can live to be 17 years or older. TNR programs that return cats to the streets subject them to these many hazards, failing to safeguard the animals' welfare after release.

A 2009 study in *Conservation Biology* (see attached) looked at common claims regarding TNR, such as the idea that feral cats do not contribute to the decline of native species and are not significant vectors or reservoirs of disease. A review of relevant literature revealed that these claims are untrue. The authors also noted that these programs usually do not receive the level of environmental analysis normally due to projects with potentially adverse environmental impacts.

Feral cats also present a human and wildlife health risk, as feral cat colonies can be a source for the spread of diseases and parasites. Diseases such as rabies and toxoplasmosis may be transmitted to humans and wildlife, and feral cats have been identified as vectors for avian flu. Feral cats may be reservoirs for parasites such as roundworms and fleas. Additionally, a study (see attached) in Florida reported that 75% of cats within a colony were infected with hookworms, a parasite known to affect humans and other wildlife.

Feral cats can be damaging to ecosystems, especially in unnaturally high numbers created by human-managed colonies. TNR fails to adequately control feral cat populations and compromises their welfare by subjecting them to potentially hazardous conditions outdoors. We strongly encourage you to vote against SB 359. Further, we urge the members of the Virginia General Assembly to pass legislation that would prohibit the public feeding of feral cats, make it unlawful to release unwanted pets or feral cats into the wild, and allow appropriate authorities to humanely eliminate feral cat colonies.

Sincerely,



Winifred B. Kessler, PhD
President Elect