

# **Feral Cat Colonies in Tuscarawas County and Potential Solutions**



**Public Health**  
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**Tuscarawas County  
Health Department**

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## Introduction

Many Tuscarawas County communities are struggling with cat colonies and potential solutions to the problem. Unfortunately, some methods of feral cat control, such as feeding bans, can pose potential public health threats to both cats and people. Thus, the Tuscarawas County Health Department encourages county leaders to carefully consider the research-based cat population solutions presented in this report.

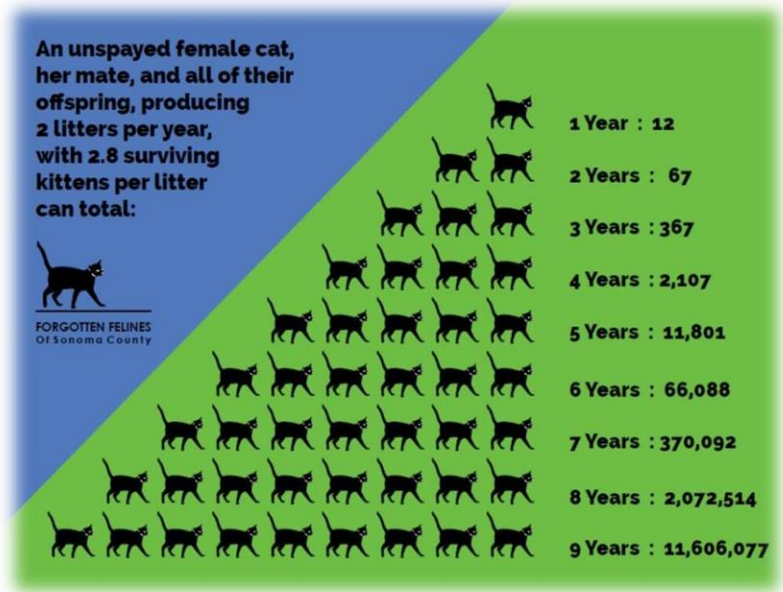
## Types of Community Cats

There are various definitions for cat types. Free-roaming cats can be defined as those that are not restricted to a yard or house. This definition is based on confinement rather than ownership or degree of socialization. Feral cats are defined based on behavior which can be classified as untamed and evasive. These cats are either born in the wild or abandoned and thus have become untrusting of humans. Tame strays are cats that no one owns but are described as having more social behavior than a feral cat. The line between outdoor, feral, and tame stray cats is often blurred into one.

## Cat Population Indicators

The reproductive capacity of cats is high, and it is estimated that free-roaming cats can produce a litter of 1-6 kittens up to 2 to 3 times per year. Further, cats are sexually mature by 5 to 6 months of age. Assuming a female cat produces at least 2 litters per year and each litter has 2.8 surviving kittens, one unspayed female and her offspring can result in 11,606,077 cats.

It is currently estimated that there are between 60 and 100 million stray and feral cats in the United States (Uys, 2024). Humane societies and rescues across the United States are at a breaking point. The current trend exacerbated by owner relinquishment, abandonment, and lack of sterilization is unsustainable. Locally, the Tuscarawas County Humane Society reported the adoption of 332 cats in 2023 and the euthanasia of an additional 48 cats due to health, injury, or other reasons. The Humane Society's capacity for cats is often met or exceeded at approximately 100 cats at any given time. Locally it is reported that many Tuscarawas County residents take unwanted litters of kittens or individual cats to Coshocton County, which more readily accepts these relinquishments due to the turnover created by higher euthanasia rates.



Source: *Forgotten Felines of Sonoma County, CA, 2024*

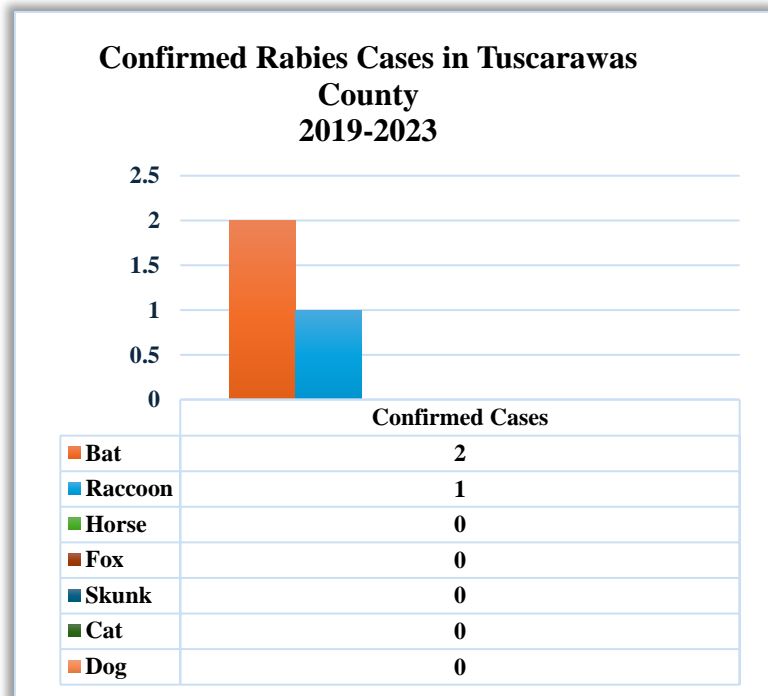
Feeding homeless cats is a common activity and “several surveys in the USA showed that **up to 22% of households feed outdoor cats that they do not own**” (Robertson, 2008). Although providing food for unowned cats is a relatively common activity, “few of those who feed cats take action to sterilize them” (Levy & Crawford, 2004). “Caretakers have reported a strong bond with the feral cats they care for, even though they do not consider these cats to be their pets” (Levy & Crawford, 2004).

### Public Health Implications of Cat Colonies

The Tuscarawas County Health Department is responsible for investigating local animal bites to ensure the prevention of rabies virus transmission and infection in the community. Reported cat bites from 2023 make up less than a quarter of all bites investigated by the Department. While rabies is the primary public health concern for any animal bite, including cats, the potential for other infections from a cat bite should be taken seriously.

**Bites:** Ohio law requires that all animal bites be reported to the local health department within 24 hours of the incident. In 2023 the Tuscarawas County Health Department investigated 172 reported animal bites, of which 33 (20%) originated from cats. Data indicates that most cat bites are likely from provoked stray cats. “This indicates that cat bites can be reduced by reducing stray cat populations” (Levy & Crawford, 2004).

**Rabies:** Rabies is a disease that is primarily transmitted by wildlife. It is of concern for public health officials since rabies is almost 100% fatal once clinical symptoms occur. “Despite continued concern about the role of cats in human rabies exposure, the **last case in a human associated with cats in the United States was reported in 1975**” (Levy & Crawford, 2004). In the last 5 years, the Ohio Department of Health has only identified one cat case of rabies in the entire State of Ohio.



**Bacterial Infections:** A cat bite carries a high risk for bacterial skin infections. “The likelihood of a cat bite becoming infected is double that of a dog bite” (World Health Organization, 2024). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 20-80% of cat bites and scratches become infected. “Because cat bites carry a high risk of serious infection, cat bite injuries should receive immediate medical attention” (Schwarzman Animal Medical Center, 2023).

## Public Nuisances

“Complaints about feral cats include the noise they make, especially intact male cats at night, (and) fecal contamination” (Robertson, 2008). The majority of the discussions that arise regarding feral or stray cats originate due to concerns about the public nuisance created by local cat colonies. General nuisances and public health nuisances should not be confused. A public health nuisance by definition in the Tuscarawas County Public Health Code (2024) includes:

1. Failure to keep waste, refuse, or garbage in an enclosed building or properly contained in a closed insect and rodent-proof container designed or reasonably adapted for such purpose, except for the immediate time preceding pick-up by a licensed solid waste hauler.
2. Accumulation of carcasses of animals, birds, or fish by failing to bury or otherwise dispose of a carcass in a sanitary manner within 24 hours after death.
3. Accumulation of decayed animal or vegetable matter, animal or human feces, trash, rubbish, garbage, scrap metal, tires, or any other substance in which flies, mosquitoes, or other disease-carrying insects, rodents, and/or other vermin can harbor. This does not include compost bins or compost sites which are being managed to acceptable standards.
4. Any structure that has become dangerous for further occupancy because of sanitary defects which may include but are not limited to accumulation of human or animal feces, evidence of garage or rotting food, infestation by rodents or insects, lack of approved potable water supply or proper sewage disposal.
5. Causing or allowing improper sewage disposal facilities to be operated, or causing or allowing the effluent from any cesspool, septic tank, drain field, or sewage disposal system to discharge upon the surface of the ground or into any body of water.

Public health nuisance complaints are assessed and abated in accordance with the Ohio Revised Code Section 3707.01. The Tuscarawas County Health Department is responsible for investigating and abating any public health nuisances, reported by a complaint, in Tuscarawas County outside the city limits of New Philadelphia. The Tuscarawas County Health Department receives many concerned citizens' complaints of suspected nuisances relating to septic systems, food safety, solid waste and trash accumulation, unused and discarded tires, animal manure, and rodent/insect infestations.

## Potential Solutions for Feral Colonies

Research literature lays out several possible solutions for feral cat control, however no option comes without concerns or limitations.

Type of Control	Available Options	Concerns
Do Nothing/ Wait and See	Take no action	Ineffective Problem increases
Destruction	Euthanasia	The ethical question of whether it is “ethically acceptable” to destroy healthy animals exists.  Poisoning is not only illegal but causes the animals pain, suffering, and slow deaths. This leads to cross-exposure for other animals and children.  Trap, remove, and euthanize programs are unlikely to succeed unless all cats are removed. Often more expensive than trap, neuter, and release (TNR) programs.
Fertility Control (TNR)	Trap, Neuter, and Release (TNR)	Requires financial and volunteer resources.  More cost-effective than trap and euthanize methods.  Requires a large percentage of the population to be sterilized to be effective.
Habitat Modification (Feeding Bans)	Eliminate sources of food, water, and shelter	Difficult to enforce.  Counterproductive to TNR efforts.  Research shows this method to be ineffective.  May result in more aggressive and destructive behaviors in cats.

## Feeding Bans

**Feeding bans are often an ineffective solution to population control of cat colonies.** In addition to the difficulty in gaining resident compliance, enforcement is both timely and costly. “Cats are scavengers and will search to find food. If a feeding ban is enacted, the cats often will stay in the area and find a new source of food. The cats will eat garbage, scraps, or other animals which do not provide cats with the nutrients they need. Malnourished cats are more susceptible to diseases and parasites. **Feeding bans create more nuisance behaviors than they eliminate.** The bans encourage cats to search through garbage, fails to spay/neuter cats and leads to the spread of

diseases. Cats without a solid source of food will wander around towns more than cats who have an area where they know they will be fed. The feeding bans also make trap-neuter-return (TNR) almost impossible because the cat caretakers cannot lure the cats to the traps with wet food” (Alley Cat Rescue, 2018). Additionally, “regularly fed, free-roaming cats are less likely to hunt and kill wildlife” (National Feline Research Council, 2020).

“The logic behind banning the feeding of outdoor cats is that if no one feeds them, they will go away. However, this doesn’t work because cats are strongly bonded to their home territories and will not easily or quickly leave familiar surroundings to search for new food sources. Instead, they tend to move closer to homes and businesses as they grow hungrier, leading to more nuisance complaint calls, greater public concern for the cats’ welfare, and underground feeding by residents. **People who feed cats will ignore the ban, even at great personal risk, and enforcement is extremely difficult, resource intensive, and unpopular**” (Humane Society of the United States, 2014).

Many organizations and associations have issued position statements on standalone cat-feeding bans. The Associated Humane Societies issued the following position statement on the topic: “AHS opposes standalone municipal cat feeding bans because they are antiquated, ineffective, inhumane, and often counterproductive.”

### **Trap, Neuter, and Release (Return) Programs**

Trap, neuter, and release (TNR) programs aim to stabilize and ultimately reduce local cat populations. There are many well-documented benefits associated with cat sterilization aside from population control. TNR “seems to be the most effective non-lethal method” to control cat colonies (Foley, Foley, Levy, & Paik, 2005). Additionally, the American Welfare Association recognizes **TNR as the “most effective and financially sustainable strategy for controlling free-roaming cat populations”** (Animal Welfare Association, 2024).

Additional benefits of sterilization of cats include increased interaction with caregivers and decreased roaming and fighting among male cats (Robertson, 2008). Additionally, sterilization prevents the birth of kittens that suffer horrible deaths in the wild. Results from TNR programs are not immediate; however, population decline is achievable. Studies indicate that “long-term reduction of feral cats is feasible by TNR” (Levy & Crawford, 2004).

For TNR programs to be most successful, residents need to be educated on the importance of sterilization of their cats and the consequences associated with animal abandonment (Hostetler, Wisely, Johnson, Pienaar, & Main). **Decreasing the source of cat colonies from owner abandonment is a common cause of TNR failure and is a “blatant failure of human responsibility and represents anti-social and immoral behavior”** (Robertson, 2008).

Additionally, continued and increased funding is essential for the long-term success of TNR programs (Robertson, 2008).

## Conclusion

The Tuscarawas County Health Department has an obligation under Ohio Revised Code 3707.01 to abate public health nuisances within its jurisdiction. The Tuscarawas County Public Health Code prescribes the conditions that rise to the level defined as a public health nuisance. While there is no doubt that cat colonies can create general nuisances, the Health Department has little control authority as the nuisance often does not fall within the prescribed definition of a public health nuisance. However, based on current research, the **Tuscarawas County Health Department agrees and supports the efforts of local TNR groups to control the cat population and increase the health and well-being of existing feral cats.** It is however recognized that for local efforts of TNR to be successful, a significant percentage of each cat colony would need to undergo sterilization. Therefore, the Health Department also supports collaborative efforts to generate funds for the sustainability of the TNR program. Further, sterilization efforts should also be coupled with pet owner education on the importance of sterilization and the societal impacts of abandonment.

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