

Galveston mulls oral birth control to rein in feral cats

BY KERI HEATH

The Galveston County Daily News

GALVESTON, Texas — An oral birth control program for felines could help reduce the population of feral cats, Galveston Island Humane Society spokespeople said.

The Galveston County Daily News reports while the organization is still investigating the project, oral contraceptive methods could supplement an island program in which people trap strays and have them neutered and vaccinated and then released, Caroline Dorsett-Pate, society executive director, said.

The trap-neuter-release program has been officially underway for three years and had neutered about 2,200 cats as of August, Dorsett-Pate said.

"The problem is, you can't really catch every cat," Dorsett-Pate said. "We're kind of looking at options that might help to decrease the breeding that's occurring as we continue to trap."

As an initial pilot, volunteers would test the birth control, composed of a low dose megestrol acetate, in specific areas, Animal Shelter Advisory Committee member Wayne Holt said.

Holt has been heading the research assessing the birth control program's feasibility in Galveston.

"The surgical sterilization through trap and neuter is preferred," Holt said. "It's a tool or a method to fill in the gap."

The oral birth control would allow the neutering program to make inroads on the feral cat

population, he said.

However, island ornithologists wonder how effective a neutering or birth control program would be.

"We are obviously losing many of our species of songbirds," Jim Stevenson, executive director of the Galveston Ornithological Society, said.

Euthanasia could provide an alternative that would save feral cats from a brutal life on the streets and protect native birds, he said.

"It seems like with an unwanted animal that it's costing money to keep alive, at some point they should be put down painlessly," Stevenson said. "If we can't kill them, I think a reasonable compromise would be a really large shelter where the cats can live out their lives, neutered."

He wants cats off the streets, where they could continue killing birds, he said.

Holt, with the shelter advisory board, agreed the oral contraceptive program isn't ideal. Cats must consume the medicine regularly and in regular doses for it to be effective, he said.

Controlling the island's cat population has been a battle for years, Marte Hersey said.

She volunteers with the humane society and assists coordination of the neutering program.

After Hurricane Ike hit Galveston in September 2008, the island feral cat population was down to about 500, she said. Now, the population is closer to 3,200, she said.

Her ultimate goal is to reduce the feral cat population as much as possible, Hersey said.

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"That wasn't the intention for cats to live outside, so it's not as humane by them," Hersey said. "It's not necessarily a great life by them."

She agrees feral cats kill birds and leave feces in their colonies, especially because Galveston cats are concen-

trated in a few areas, she said.

The humane society and animal shelter committee now await approval from the Texas Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners to move forward with a pilot version of the oral birth control project, Holt said.