

Best Management Practice Guidelines for Feral Cats (TNR/RTF/RTH) in Communities with Flea-borne Typhus

**Compiled by the Orange County Mosquito and Vector Control District
Protecting Public Health in Orange County Since 1947**

<https://www.ocvector.org/flea-borne-typhus>

Human cases of flea-borne typhus are increasing in Orange County. The mission of the Orange County Mosquito and Vector Control District (OCMVCD) is to educate and protect Orange County from vectors and vector-borne diseases in an environmentally responsible manner. The OCMVCD responds to human flea-borne typhus cases to identify and abate flea infestations and conditions that cause flea infestations. In Orange County, cats (feral, free-roaming, unowned, and owned) are infested with fleas that can transmit flea-borne typhus bacteria. Anyone who has contact with infected fleas is at risk for flea-borne typhus. Prevention of flea-borne typhus is achieved by reducing exposure to fleas. The sterilization and release (TNR/RTF/RTH¹) of cats into colonies, where they are fed at feeding stations, increases human exposure to fleas and flea disease because currently there is no effective method to apply flea control to feral cat colonies.

To minimize the inherent public health risks associated with releasing sterilized cats within Orange County, the following best management practices are advised:

- 1) Sterilized cats should not be released within 0.3 miles² of mobile home communities, hospitals, convalescent homes, schools, childcare facilities, workplaces, and public lands such as beaches, parks, schools, and flood control channels to protect the health and safety of the public, environment, and waterways.
- 2) Sterilized cats should not be fed by caretakers or released onto properties with cats and cat feeding present, so as not to increase the abundance of cats at existing cat colonies.
- 3) Sterilized cats should not be released onto private property without the explicit consent of the property owner.
- 4) Sterilized cats should not be released in local city jurisdictions until notification and approval has been obtained by the local city in accordance with city policies.
- 5) Sterilized cats should not be released within 0.3 miles of human flea-borne typhus exposure sites. If a disease cluster of human flea-borne typhus cases, defined as two or more human cases occurring within 0.5 miles, sterilized cats should not be released within the area of the disease cluster³.
- 6) If local animal care agencies or rescue organizations release sterilized cats into Orange County neighborhoods, the local animal care agency should provide outreach and education to the neighborhood that includes information about the risk of flea-borne typhus, the importance of year-round flea control on pets, and the process to report complaints of fleas and feral cats.

¹ TNR/RTF/RTH: Trap Neuter Return/Return To Field/Return to Home

² UC IPM Pest Notes: Feral Cats UC ANR Publication 74178

³ OCMVCD is signatory to a Memorandum of Understanding with the Orange County Health Care Agency. OCMVCD investigates human cases of flea-borne typhus and is permitted to notify local animal care agencies if conditions conducive to flea-borne typhus are present at the exposure site.

- 7) Local animal care agencies or rescue organizations releasing sterilized cats should establish written guidelines that include the following: education of staff and volunteers on release site restrictions for cats: do not release sterilized cats at mobile home communities, public lands such as beaches, parks, schools, flood control channels; hospitals, convalescent homes, and workplaces; a process for residents to report complaints of fleas and feral cats and for the local animal care staff to respond to complaints of fleas and feral cats; frequent review of cat release locations.
- 8) Animal care agencies and local government should enforce cat licensing requirements to track and monitor TNR/RTF/RTH colonies and colony management.
- 9) The animal care agency and local government should enforce violations of ordinances aimed to protect animal welfare through responsible pet ownership.

OCMVCD encourages cities, animal care agencies, and animal welfare groups working within communities impacted by flea-borne typhus to implement policies and messaging that comply with the guidelines.

The release of sterilized cats in Orange County has inherent environmental impacts that should be thoroughly studied and mitigated prior to implementation. The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is a statute that requires state and local agencies to identify the significant environmental impacts of programs and to avoid, or mitigate, those impacts if feasible. It is recommended that local governments investigate if the environmental impacts caused by the release of cats necessitate CEQA compliance.

Flea-borne typhus is an increasing public health threat that has the potential to affect all residents of Orange County. To reduce the risk of flea-borne typhus to Orange County residents, animal control agencies, cities, and communities must partner to promote policies and actions that minimize exposure to fleas and wild or stray animals. More information about flea-borne typhus can be found here: <https://www.ocvector.org/flea-borne-typhus> .