



FieldHaven Feline Center

"For Every Cat in Need, a Solution"

Guidelines for Vets and Shelters Collaborating with Rescue Groups and Feral Cat Colony Managers on H5N1 Risk Mitigation

Last Updated: January 3, 2025

The Importance of Proactive Monitoring and Management

H5N1 avian influenza poses a potential risk to feral cats, especially during local outbreaks among wild birds. Cats can contract the virus by consuming infected prey, raw or undercooked poultry, or through contaminated environments. While large-scale feral colony outbreaks have not yet been observed, localized infections remain a concern. This guideline provides practical, evidence-based recommendations to mitigate risk and protect both animals and humans.

Why Proactive Measures Are Essential

1. Preventing Outbreaks in Feral Cat Colonies
 - While large outbreaks have not been documented in feral colonies, individual infections could serve as a warning signal of broader environmental risks.
 - Cats may act as mixing vessels for influenza viruses, increasing the potential for zoonotic (animal-to-human) transmission.
2. Recognizing Symptoms of H5N1 in Cats
 - Respiratory signs: Difficulty breathing, coughing, sneezing.
 - Neurological signs: Tremors, uncoordinated movements, seizures.
 - Lethargy or sudden death: Rapid decline with minimal prior symptoms.
 - Early identification and response to these symptoms are critical to limiting spread and identifying H5N1 hotspots.

Key Actions for Vets and Shelters

1. Stay Informed on Local Outbreaks
 - Regularly monitor news and alerts about avian influenza outbreaks in wild bird populations.
 - Collaborate with local animal health authorities to receive timely updates.
2. Limit Cat Exposure to Wild Birds

- Reduce feral cats' access to areas frequented by wild birds, especially waterfowl and ground-feeding species.
 - Remove and properly dispose of bird carcasses to prevent cats from feeding on potentially infected birds.
 - Relocate colonies away from high-risk areas, such as wetlands, ponds, rivers, or other locations where waterfowl gather.
 - Minimize attractions for wild birds near colonies by:
 - i. Avoiding the placement of open food containers or water sources.
 - ii. Keeping colony environments tidy and free of debris or organic matter that might draw birds.
3. Implement Colony Surveillance
 - Encourage caregivers to watch for behavioral or health changes in colony cats, such as sudden lethargy or illness.
 - Use trail cameras to observe cats and detect unusual activity or mortality events in the colony.
 4. Use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - When handling sick or deceased cats, always wear gloves, masks, and other PPE to reduce the risk of exposure to potentially infected animals.
 5. Remove and Test Sick Cats Promptly
 - Isolate and remove visibly sick cats from the colony for veterinary evaluation.
 - Advocate for necropsy or laboratory testing of deceased cats when possible to confirm or rule out H5N1.

Special Considerations for Caregivers and Managers

1. Promote Safe Feeding Practices
 - Advise colony caregivers to avoid providing raw or undercooked poultry as food, which could carry the virus.
 - Recommend commercially prepared cat food or thoroughly cooked scraps.
2. Encourage Reporting
 - Instruct caregivers to report clusters of unexplained cat illnesses or deaths to animal health authorities immediately.
3. Educate on H5N1 Risks
 - Share simplified explanations of how cats contract H5N1 and the potential consequences of infection.
 - Emphasize the role of cats as potential indicators of environmental H5N1 presence.

The Bigger Picture: Cats as Flu "Mixing Vessels"

Cats infected with H5N1 could combine avian and mammalian flu viruses, increasing the risk of a new virus emerging that could infect humans. This underscores the need for careful monitoring and rapid response during outbreaks. By working together, vets, shelters, and rescue groups can help prevent the spread of H5N1 and safeguard both animal and public health.

Conclusion: Vigilance is Key

Although the risk of H5N1 spreading widely in feral colonies remains low, localized infections are possible during wild bird outbreaks. Proactive measures—such as monitoring, using PPE, relocating colonies from high-risk areas, and promptly isolating sick animals—can significantly reduce risks. By staying vigilant, we can protect feral cats and minimize potential zoonotic threats.

Kate Allison, DVM

January 2025