



## County Policies Relating to Free-Roaming Cats



### COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENTS OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL

There are two County agencies involved in responding to public complaints about free-roaming cats and the frequently associated problems of accumulated fecal material and flea infestations: the Department of Public Health (DPH), and the Department of Animal Care and Control (DACC). DPH responds to residents' complaints and determines whether site conditions represent a public health risk or public nuisance. DACC receives free-roaming cats in its six shelters. Both DPH and DACC address cat-related problems only in response to complaints from the public, and neither of these departments engage in the routine trapping and removal of free-roaming cats.

#### Potential Public Health Risks

Fleas have been associated worldwide with emerging human infections including flea-borne typhus caused by the bacterium *Rickettsia felis*. Cat fleas, *Ctenocephalides felis*, regularly infest dogs, cats and opossums in Southern California. Since 2006, Los Angeles and Orange Counties have had 122 reported human cases of this disease; all but one of the cases have been linked to the cat flea. While flea-borne typhus is treatable and rarely fatal, it is debilitating; most reported cases within Los Angeles County have required hospitalization.

The accumulation of fecal material also poses a potential risk of disease. Infectious agents in animal feces may be acquired as a result of direct contact with the animal, its feces or contaminated surfaces, or ingestion of food, dirt or sand contaminated with feces. The parasitic diseases include toxoplasmosis, cryptosporidiosis, giardiasis, roundworm, and hookworm. With many of these diseases, certain groups are at higher risk of serious disease or complications; these include the very young and the elderly, and persons with immune system weakness caused by medications, cancer treatment, HIV, and pregnancy.

Toxoplasmosis is caused by *Toxoplasma gondii*, an infectious organism found in cat feces. In the United States, research documented in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Study (1999-2004) estimates that 11% of humans 12 years and older have been infected with this organism. Although infection usually does not cause symptoms, individuals infected with HIV or transplant recipients on immune-suppressive therapy can develop a deadly form of encephalitis. If infection occurs for the first time during pregnancy, the parasite can cross the placenta, possibly leading to severe consequences including miscarriage or death of the fetus. Up to 2% of humans infected with this organism after birth develop eye disease. Another disease, toxocariasis, is caused by accidental ingestion of cat roundworm eggs which are shed in cat feces. The parasite may migrate through tissue, causing damage to the various organs including the eyes. The cat hookworm larva may penetrate human skin and cause irritation as it migrates; however, it does not mature to adulthood in the human host. Giardiasis and cryptosporidiosis are diarrheal diseases easily transmitted from animal feces. Cryptosporidiosis is particularly dangerous and can be life-threatening in immunocompromised persons; there is no effective treatment for this disease.

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Several harmful bacteria can be transmitted in animal feces or fecally contaminated objects, surfaces, food, and water. The most common fecal pathogens are salmonella and campylobacter. These cause diarrhea, fever and abdominal pain; illness can be severe and rarely even fatal in some individuals.

### Department of Public Health Response to Complaints

The presence of free-roaming cats, by itself, is not a violation of the County Health Code. However, when DPH finds, in response to a complaint from the public, a flea infestation or accumulation of feces, a Notice of Violation is issued to the property owner/responsible party to abate these conditions. In response to a Notice of Violation, the responsible party may elect to trap the cats themselves or with the assistance of a licensed pest control company and surrender the cats to a local shelter. Alternatively the responsible party may choose to chemically control the fleas on the cats and in the yard and regularly dispose of fecal material where there is a risk of human infection. In either case, DPH considers the Notice of Violation to be complied with as long as the conditions which presented the potential health risk or public nuisance have been abated. DPH does not trap cats from public or private property, nor does DPH require the responsible party to trap and eliminate cats from affected properties.

### Department of Animal Care and Control's Jurisdiction and Policies

The Department of Animal Care and Control's jurisdiction over animals in Los Angeles County is limited geographically to the unincorporated areas of

the County and to the 50 cities it contracts with to provide animal care and control services. Other animal care and control agencies within the County may respond to challenges raised by free-roaming cats differently.

DACC does not usually trap cats unless they are sick, injured, or have bitten a member of the public. The majority of cats in County shelters are cats that have been surrendered to DACC by private owners who can no longer care for their cats, or by property owners who remove cats causing a nuisance on their property. All cats brought to County shelters are examined, treated, and are held for the period required by law. With some exceptions, cats are required to be held for six days, pending retrieval by their owners or adoption by the public or rescue organization, but many healthy, adoptable cats are held much longer. In the event a cat required to be held at a shelter is not retrieved by its owner or adopted, the County will, as a last resort, euthanize the cat.

DACC may order a property owner to reduce the number of animals to the legally allowed number of animals. In the unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County and in many of the contract cities, a property owner may legally keep three cats, or up to five cats if all cats are spayed and neutered and live primarily indoors. Citations may be issued for failure to comply with this order.

The County of Los Angeles encourages all pet owners to act responsibly and have their cats vaccinated, microchipped, treated regularly for fleas, spayed or neutered, and confined to the owner's property. All persons interested in adopting a cat from a Los Angeles County shelter are warmly encouraged to do so.

For more information, please visit the websites of the Department of Public Health and the Department of Animal Care and Control:

<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov>

<http://animalcare.lacounty.gov>

12/17/09