

## 10th Life Sanctuary Closure

One of the largest cat rescues in US history came to an end Monday, December 21st, after the closure of a rural South Florida cat sanctuary led to the transfer of hundreds of thin and diseased cats to other agencies for rehabilitation.

Following a citizen's complaint regarding conditions at the sanctuary, a team of animal cruelty experts from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Humane Society of the United States, and the University of Florida Shelter Medicine Program accompanied La Belle Animal Control Director Doug Morgan on a surprise inspection of the facility on November 16.

After confronting sanctuary owner Maury Swee with their findings that unacceptable conditions at the sanctuary resulted in a high rate of illness and death among the cats, he stated that he was unable to make improvements and had insufficient resources to continue operating in its current state. The following day Swee elected to relinquish all of the cats to animal control and to close the sanctuary. An animal cruelty investigation is ongoing.

Thirteen critically ill and suffering cats were immediately euthanized and submitted to the state's Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory in Kissimmee where necropsies revealed the emaciated cats suffered from severe anemia, infections, and organ failure brought on by parasitism, malnutrition, and untreated diseases. Swee said none of the cats had received veterinary care for their illnesses.

Morgan recruited an interagency team of specialized volunteer responders from across Florida to help the nearly 600 cats remaining on the property. Responding agencies included experts in disaster animal sheltering led by the Bay Area Disaster Animal Response Team (DART), animal cruelty investigation led by the ASPCA Crime Scene Investigation unit, and animal triage and medical care led by the University of Florida's Veterinary Emergency Treatment Service and Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program.

Over a three-day period beginning November 23, the UF Shelter Medicine Program lead a team of veterinarians, veterinary students, and technicians in a triage operation to examine each cat, collect forensic documentation, test for feline leukemia virus, feline immunodeficiency virus, and heartworms, implant identification microchips, and treat for internal and external parasites. During this initial evaluation phase 93 cats were identified by the veterinary team as having severe illness affecting quality of life. It was determined that the most humane choice for these severely ill cats was humane euthanasia.

Volunteers from Bay Area DART remained on site to assist LaBelle Animal Control with the disposition of the remaining cats. A plan was implemented to give cat owners a chance to reclaim the animals that they relinquished to the sanctuary, to transfer cats to shelters and rescue groups throughout the southeast, and for the public to adopt unclaimed cats. While the sanctuary owner did not make information available regarding

who originally relinquished the cats, he was asked to personally contact former cat owners to give them an opportunity to reclaim their cats.

"We were heartened by the response from so many humane agencies," said Connie Brooks, Operations Director of SPCA Tampa bay/Bay area DART. "Even though infectious diseases were rampant throughout this facility and about half of the cats were feral, we were able to transfer the vast majority to other agencies. The entire humane community pulled together to create a happy ending for this sad story."

The record for the longest distance travelled went to 5 cats flown to Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Utah for treatment of advanced medical conditions. The largest transfer was 46 cats sent to bordering Lee County Animal Refuge Center in Ft. Myers. Each agency received a thorough background and reference check to assure that the cats would not be transferred from one unacceptable situation to another.

"The vast majority of cats sent to this sanctuary died within a few years of arrival and many of the survivors had substantial medical conditions and carried multiple infectious diseases," Morgan said. "Some had even arrived as victims of previous cruelty and hoarding investigations. We knew we had to be sure these cats were going to new placements that were prepared to provide for their special needs."

The cat rescue project was made possible by more than \$40,000 in grants and free diagnostic testing services, cat food, litter, crates, and other supplies from IDEXX Laboratories, PetSmart Charities, ASPCA, HSUS, and private donors. Thousands of volunteer hours were expended. After more than 4 weeks, the interagency task force that kept the sanctuary open after its owner gave up the cats had exhausted all leads for cat placements.

The final statistics tell a story of success and sadness. The closure of the 10th Life Sanctuary represents one of the largest cat rescues in US history. A total of 110 cats were euthanized in the first days of medical triage due to critical medical illnesses, including 17 that were euthanized immediately following the unannounced inspection. Of the remaining 485 cats, 75 of the ferals were euthanized when new placements could not be found for them. This 15% euthanasia rate for the savable cats is in stark contrast to the vast majority of large-scale feline cruelty impoundments in which mass euthanasia is the most common outcome.

Doug Morgan  
Director, City of LaBelle Animal Control