

Feral Cat Laws in Select States

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Issue

This report summarizes state laws related to feral cats in New England and New York.

Summary

Connecticut law allows municipalities to adopt ordinances requiring feral cat keepers to register with the local animal control officer (ACO) and prohibiting cat owners or keepers from letting cats cause property damage or an unsanitary, dangerous, or unreasonably offensive condition. In these municipalities, an ACO may impound cats causing damage or unsanitary, dangerous, or unreasonably offensive conditions and try to locate the cats' owners or keepers. If a cat goes unclaimed, the ACO may have it sterilized and sold as a pet or put down humanely.

Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New York each operate programs that help low-income residents sterilize their cats or dogs (e.g., animal population control programs).

Connecticut's program also helps nonprofit animal rescue groups sterilize and vaccinate feral cats.

Maine, New York, and Rhode Island laws permit people to release stray or feral cats to animal shelters, who may adopt out the animals or euthanize them under certain conditions. In Vermont, a person can use an approved rabies vaccine to inoculate a feral cat without using a licensed veterinarian.

Connecticut

Municipal Feral Cat Ordinances

Connecticut law allows a municipality to adopt an ordinance requiring individuals who keep feral cats in residential or commercial areas to register with the municipality's ACO within one year of the ordinance's adoption. The ACO must give them information on the proper care and management of feral cats. The ordinance must require feral cat keepers to sterilize and vaccinate the cat against rabies. The law specifies that if a feral cat is adopted from a municipal pound, its keeper is eligible for cat sterilization financial assistance under the state's animal population control program (see below) ([CGS § 22-339d\(a\)](#)). (The law also allows a municipality to adopt an ordinance prohibiting anyone owning or keeping a cat from letting it (1) substantially damage property other than the owner's or keeper's property or (2) cause an unsanitary, dangerous, or unreasonably offensive condition. A violation of such an ordinance is, by law, an infraction ([CGS § 22-339d\(b\)](#).)

The law defines a "feral cat" as a free-roaming cat that is not owned. A "keeper" is a person who, or organization that, harbors, regularly feeds, possesses, or forbids an ACO from impounding a feral cat.

The law does not specify the penalty for violating a feral cat ordinance adopted under [CGS § 22-339d\(a\)](#). But, state law allows municipalities to issue citations for violating local ordinances and regulations ([CGS § 7-148\(c\)\(10\)\(A\)](#)). The municipality must designate the ordinances and regulations it wants to enforce by citation and specify the officials who can issue them. Citations may be issued for fines up to \$250 unless the statutes specify otherwise.

Unclaimed Cat Impounded by an ACO

By law, an ACO for a municipality that has adopted a cat ordinance under [CGS § 22-339d\(b\)](#) may impound a cat (1) found to be damaging property other than property of its owner or keeper or (2) causing an unsanitary, dangerous, or unreasonably offensive condition unless the cat is under the care of an owner or keeper of feral cats. If the owner or keeper is not known, the ACO must publish a description of the cat in the local newspaper's lost and found column. If a cat is not claimed within seven days of publication, the ACO may have a veterinarian sterilize the cat and then sell the cat as a pet. An ACO must have a cat that remains unclaimed put down humanely ([CGS § 22-332d](#)).

Animal Population Control Program

The Department of Agriculture's [Animal Population Control Program](#) (1) provides sterilization and vaccination options for state residents who adopt cats and dogs from municipal pounds, (2) provides low-income state residents discounted sterilization and vaccination options for their dogs

and cats, and (3) assists registered nonprofit rescue groups with the sterilization and vaccination of feral cats. No more than 20% of the animal population control account funds may be used for the feral cat program ([CGS § 22-380g](#) as amended by [PA 21-90](#) § 10).

Maine

Maine defines a “feral cat” as a cat with no owner identification that consistently exhibits extreme fear in the presence of people. The law allows ACOs and people to bring stray cats to an animal shelter. If the stray cat is homeless or feral, the shelter must hold it for at least 48 hours (if homeless) or 24 hours (if feral). After this period, the shelter may offer the cat for adoption, sell it, give it away, or dispose of it humanely. The shelter, an ACO, or a state humane agent may authorize the cat’s immediate euthanasia if it is severely sick or injured if, among other things, a veterinarian states in writing the cat’s recovery is unlikely or the cat presents a danger to the public (Me. Rev. Stat. Ann. tit. 7, §§ 3907, 3919 & 3919-A).

Massachusetts

Massachusetts operates a [Homeless Animal Prevention and Care Fund](#), which the Department of Agricultural Resources uses to (1) offset the costs of vaccinating and sterilizing homeless cats and dogs, (2) help low-income residents vaccinate and sterilize their cats and dogs, and (3) help with ACO training costs. Funds come from voluntary donations, gifts, and grants (Mass. Gen. Laws Ann. ch. 10 § 35WW).

New Hampshire

The New Hampshire Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food runs an [Animal Population Control Program](#) to reduce the population of unwanted and stray cats and dogs. The program provides financial assistance for low-income residents to spay or neuter their cat or dog (N.H. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 437-A:2).

New York

Animal Population Control Program

New York law requires the Department of Agriculture and Markets to contract with an independent nonprofit entity to administer the state [Animal Population Control Program](#). The program is intended to reduce the population of unwanted and stray cats and dogs, thereby reducing euthanasia rates and public health threats. It provides low-cost spaying and neutering services to low-income residents (N.Y. Agric. & Mkts. Law § 117-a).

Stray and Homeless Animals

New York law allows a humane society, society for the prevention of cruelty to animals, ACO, or police officer to have a stray or homeless animal humanely euthanized if a veterinarian or two reputable citizens find that the animal is so maimed, diseased, disabled, or infirm that euthanasia is warranted. If this finding is not made, then the animal, after five days, may be placed for adoption or be humanely euthanized. But municipalities may, by ordinance, set forth a different time period (not less than three days) for unclaimed cats whose owners cannot be identified provided that such cats are made available solely for adoption (N.Y. Agric. & Mkts. Law § 374).

Rhode Island

Under Rhode Island law, resident cat owners must have their cats that are over three months old wear an identification tag at all times unless they meet certain exemptions (e.g., are kept exclusively indoors or confined in outdoor areas and kept for breeding purposes). ACOs may fine anyone in violation; fines collected are remitted to the municipality where the violation occurred (R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 4-22-3 & 4-22-7).

The law authorizes ACOs to impound feral (i.e., wild, unsocialized, or untamed) cats and dispose of them or release them to a licensed animal shelter (R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 4-22-2 & 4-22-8).

If a feral cat is released to an animal shelter or impounded in a municipal pound, the shelter or pound must hold the cat for at least five days if it is wearing identification or two days if not. After this period, if the cat is not claimed, the shelter or pound may offer it for adoption or sale or otherwise dispose of it. If the feral cat is without identification and poses a danger, the shelter or pound may euthanize the cat before the period ends. Additionally, the period does not apply to any injured or maimed cat that a veterinarian examines and confirms in writing should be destroyed for humane reasons (R.I. Gen. Laws § 4-22-5).

By law, a shelter or pound cannot release a feral cat that was impounded without identification until the owner complies with the cat identification requirements (R.I. Gen. Laws § 4-22-6).

Vermont

Under Vermont law, an owner of a domestic pet must have a licensed veterinarian inoculate the animal against rabies with an approved vaccine. However, the law allows a person to use an approved rabies vaccine to inoculate a feral cat that takes up residence in a building (other than the person's home) without using a licensed veterinarian for this purpose (Vt. Stat. Ann. tit. 20, § 3581a).

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