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## Feral felines get more than nine lives



Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles County is planning to raze buildings at the Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey. But about 150 feral cats living on the property pose a problem.

**What's to be done with 150 cats encroaching on county property earmarked for a \$68 million data center? Officials and cat feeders have come up with a life-sparing solution.**

By Mary Engel, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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Linda East knew better than to name the feral cats she fed each day. Don't get attached, people told her. But she couldn't help herself.

So the well-fed felines that lived under the vacant cottages and boarded-up polio wards south of the Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center came to be known as Smudge, Precious, Big Mama, Little Bit and Grandpa Tom. And Los Angeles County, which owns the Downey property, came to have a problem.



 PHOTO GALLERY

[Cat Colony](#)

After years of delay, the county was finally planning to raze some of the ramshackle buildings and construct a high-tech data center to process employee payrolls, welfare payments, court documents and other records. The partially underground facility would be the county's first energy-saving "green" building, with a vegetated roof and landscaped berms to absorb storm runoff.

But standing in the way of kudos were cats. About 150 of them. With names.

"It's a [long pause] *difficult* situation," said Jan Takata of the county's Chief Administrative Office, which oversees Rancho's south campus.

Takata had both practical and political reasons to choose his words carefully.

For starters, figuring out what to do with feral cats has vexed animal control managers, veterinarians and biologists around the world. The never-tamed offspring of abandoned or lost pets, they are usually too wild to be adopted as house pets.

Trapping feral cats to euthanize them is time-consuming, expensive and far from foolproof. And killing the cats on site is not palatable to the public, as Wisconsinites discovered in 2005 when not even hunters wanted to legalize cat shoots.

Animal welfare groups are especially active in Southern California. The county need only look at the city of Los Angeles, where activists unhappy with euthanasia rates at city shelters have driven out the last three general managers of the city's Animal Services Department. In addition, animal advocates have filed three civil lawsuits in recent months alleging poor conditions and mistreatment in county shelters.

Although the county is at least a year away from starting construction, Takata and other officials have been meeting with East and other cat feeders since last fall about what to do with the animals.

"We realized it would take some time," Takata said.

Opened in 1887 as the County Poor Farm, the 210-acre Rancho campus is split in two by Imperial Highway. The rehabilitation center, nationally known for the treatment of spinal injuries and stroke, is north of the highway.

Three years ago, lawsuits blocked county plans to privatize the hospital. Today it is busier than ever, having added acute-care beds to take in patients displaced by the closure last year of the county-owned Martin Luther King Jr.-Harbor Hospital in nearby Wilmington.

But the south campus' heyday was decades ago. It once housed poor county residents who were too ill, old or disabled to care for themselves. In exchange for room and board, those who could work picked vegetables and tended to a dairy herd that provided milk to all the county's hospitals.

As poor farms nationwide disappeared with the advent of government welfare programs in the 1930s, Rancho evolved into a hospital for chronic illnesses. The polio epidemic of the 1950s first established its reputation for rehabilitation.

Today, a few south campus buildings are still in use, including a child-care center for Rancho employees and a county crime laboratory. But the polio wards, laboratories, dining halls, cottages, chapel and movie theater have stood empty since the late 1980s. Graffiti, broken windows and kicked-in doors testify to the vagrants who have passed through, stripping the vacant buildings of copper wire and anything else of value. Feral cats moved in and multiplied, forming at least eight distinct colonies across the campus.

East, 54, first noticed the cats about four years ago while out for a stroll in an empty field on the edge of the ghost town. She and husband David East, 55, a retired public works manager, live nearby and have two cats of their own (and three grown children). The scared, scrawny tabbies tugged at their hearts.

After they started putting out kibble and fresh water, they met other feeders. Deciding that feeding the cats wasn't enough, the group contacted Fail-Safe 4 Felines, a Downey nonprofit that aims to reduce the number of cats euthanized at animal shelters by sterilizing feral cats.

Fail-Safe and other animal welfare groups promote a program known as trap, neuter and release. Feral cats are fixed, vaccinated against rabies, given a flea bath and marked with a notched ear. Those that can be tamed are offered for adoption. Most are returned to the colony. Feeders maintain the colony -- trapping and sterilizing any new cats with un-notched ears -- until the last cat dies.

That is, unless the cat colony's home is slated to become a \$68-million county data center.

"We've been back and forth with [the county] trying to find a resolution," said Linda East. "We all know they have to be relocated. It's just, where do you put so many cats?"

The pending construction is not the first time the county and the cat advocates have met over a difficult situation.

To keep out copper thieves, the county began boarding up the crawl spaces last year on a blocks-long dormitory that was home to a colony of cats. A cat that was unable to dart into a boarded-up entry died after being hit by a car in a narrow alley.

"We said, 'If the boards are not removed, animal lovers anywhere wouldn't be too happy to find out that cats were being trapped in the building without food and water,' " said Jack East.

The county took down some of the boards.

Then workers at the child-care center complained that cats from a colony across the street were using a sandbox as a litter box. The Easts lured the cats farther from the center by moving their feeding sites.

Complaining of fleas, employees of the county crime lab set out their own traps. Just before Christmas, they snagged two cats and whisked them to a local shelter. But the cats had already been given the Fail-Safe treatment, which included injecting a microchip for identification. The shelter notified the Easts, who were able to spring Miss Peanut and Bow Tie.

To the Easts, feeding the cats is part of the solution, not the problem.

"It was irresponsible cat owners who dumped their cats there that got this thing started," said Jack East. "We just came in to provide a service to residents of Downey, at no cost to the county."

Not to mention, he added, "There's no rat or mouse problem here."

Working with Fail-Safe and other volunteers, the Easts say they have so far sterilized about 90% of Rancho's 150 cats -- a number that they estimate would have multiplied to at least 1,100 without their efforts.

Cat advocates hoped at first to move the colonies displaced by the data center to another place on the sprawling campus, since further redevelopment plans have yet to be approved by the county Board of Supervisors.

They said they were told that one colony of about 15 cats has to be out within a month and the rest of the cats gone by the end of the year.

But for the most part, the Easts praise the county for being willing to work with them. They were particularly pleased when, earlier this month, the county said that it was sending hundreds of fliers to equine centers and feed stores advertising a new initiative called Project Barn Cat.

"We're trying to get these cats placed in local barns and equestrian environments, where hay storage makes rats a problem," said Michelle Roache, deputy director of the county's Department of Animal Services and Control.

Relocating feral cats isn't easy, according to Nancy Peterson, feral cat program manager for the Humane Society of the United States. Not only must cats be kept in cages for weeks until they become accustomed to their new feeding sites, but also caretakers must be found to monitor the new colonies.

Still, she too applauded the county's efforts.

"I certainly don't think trapping them and euthanizing them would be an effective solution or a very popular one," she said.

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