

Mexico Drafting Army Of Cats

MONTERREY, Mexico, Sept. 29, 2004

Rats of Atascaderos note: The tough city cats of Chihuahua are coming - and they are hungry.

Chihuahua state officials say they hope to collect an army of 700 felines for a frontal attack on Atascaderos, an isolated farm village in the rugged Tarahumara mountains, a region where officials estimate the rat population at half a million.

The cats are being collected in Chihuahua city, capital of the northern Mexican state of the same name, where they will be vaccinated and checked for rabies and then shipped by truck to Atascaderos, about 300 miles to the south, said Roberto Gallegos, a health official who is overseeing the recruitment of the cats.

"So far we don't have any cats, but an animal control agency already promised to donate 50," Gallegos said. "Our goal is to stop the rats from reproducing and that's how we hope the cats can help."

Ads asking for cat donations started circulating in Chihuahua newspapers Monday and officials hope some 200 will be ready to travel to Atascaderos this weekend.

Villagers in Atascaderos, a town of 3,000 people, started noticing the rodent problem a year ago when rats appeared in barns and warehouses where they stored their produce.

Farmers started setting traps and poison, but the effort backfired: cats and other animals that prey on rats started dying instead.

"Now they have no cats left and the rats just keep reproducing," Gallegos said.

Eustaquio Marin, a spokesman for the municipality of Guadalupe y Calvo, where Atascaderos is located, said about 800 households are infested with the rats. He said there was an average of 200 rats per home.

With the rats able to produce 800 offspring per year, authorities fear they could soon start spreading to neighboring villages.

"It's like the problem in "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" tale, but unfortunately that flutist doesn't exist and what we have here is an imminent health problem," Gallegos said.

The plan alarmed Emilia de Leon of the Animal Protection Society in Monterrey, the largest urban area in northern Mexico.

"Are they going to bring the cats to die of hunger?" she asked, and said it would be "a very big mistake" to use cats that had not been sterilized.

"Now there is going to be a plague of cats and what are they going to do - start to exterminate cats?" she asked.

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