

for experiments.

"To prevent the animals from being sent to the center, we must act fast to find new owners for them," Onda said.

Launched in May 2000, the UC group has saved 227 dogs and cats from this fate as of the end of December, with 137 of them taken in by new owners and 19 dogs returned to their former owners.

Currently, one cat and 17 dogs are in the temporary custody of the group's members, waiting for someone to take them in, Abe said. He is currently caring for three such dogs and 12 cats at his Urayasu home.

In Chiba Prefecture, the number of animals put to sleep by authorities, especially dogs, has been on the decline since it peaked in 1988 at 36,067. However, the overall figure was still the nation's largest after Fukuoka Prefecture, where the number came to about 29,000 in fiscal 2000, according to Fusako Nogami, director of All Life In a Viable Environment, or ALIVE, a Tokyo-based nonprofit organization.

Nationwide, about 700,000 dogs and cats are killed at public facilities every year after being brought in by their owners or captured as strays, Nogami said.

"There seems no end to capturing, taking in and disposing of abandoned animals," lamented Hideki Maruyama, a veterinarian at the Animal Protection Center.

The facility also claims to protect animals by educating the public in how to take care of them, giving medical treatment to injured animals and finding new owners for abandoned dogs and cats.

However, Maruyama said his staff is too busy putting animals to sleep, as all of the captured and abandoned dogs and cats are gathered here from across the prefecture.

"Many owners lack a sense of morality," Maruyama said. "Many dogs have ended up being sent here after they became strays, after being let loose or abandoned at beaches or fishing ports."

Since the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, large pedigree dogs such as Labrador retrievers and Siberian huskies often become strays, he said.

Thanks to the recent efforts by the prefecture, 532 stray dogs and cats were returned to owners and 238 were given new owners in fiscal 2000, according to Jinya Kaseki, an official of the prefecture's health guidance division.

Still, Chiba has no choice but to accept more pets without charge and capture stray dogs to prevent them from hurting people, Kaseki said.

The tight controls on stray dogs date back to the early 1970s, when three children were killed by wild