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County official lobbies pet bill

By DJ Becker/The Madera Tribune

Madera County Animal Shelter executive director Kirsten Gross is one of those supporting the Healthy Pets Act, which was introduced in the state Assembly Friday.

The act would make the spaying and neutering of all cats and dogs more than 4 months of age mandatory throughout the state, and would levy \$500 fines against pet owners who failed to comply. The fine would be in the form of a "fix-it ticket." The bill must be passed by the Assembly and Senate.



Gross went to Sacramento last week, along with Judie Mancuso of Laguna Beach, to lobby legislators on behalf of the act. Mancuso is Healthy Pets Act initiator and campaign director for the California Healthy Pets Coalition.

The public pays heavily for picking up, caring for and euthanizing unwanted pets, Mancuso said.

According to figures gathered by Mancuso from the California Department of Health Services, Veterinary Public Health, 841,000 dogs and cats entered state shelters in 2005. Of those 430,240, or approximately 51 percent, were euthanized, at an estimated cost of \$132,513,899.

"When so many healthy lives are being lost, something has to change," Mancuso said.

Shelter statistics show Madera County euthanized more than 5,000 dogs and cats in 2006.

"I'd say that's education policy failure," Gross said. "We in animal control make the hard choices. We do a good job of making the public's problems disappear. But the awful truth is that the problems, the unwanted and excess dogs and cats, are euthanized and disappear into freezers and trucks for disposal. That includes puppies and kittens."

The law provides exemptions for persons with purebreds registered with the American Kennel Club, or other recognized purebred dog or cat breeding groups. Those in the pet breeding industry will be able to obtain "intact permits," which allow registered breeding animals to remain intact. Police dogs, and rescue and guide dogs would be exempt. Other exemptions would be given due to age, illness or the poor health of an animal, as determined by a veterinarian.

Fees for intact permits would be determined by each county animal control agency. Fees and fines collected would be returned to local animal control departments, according to the proposed bill.

According to Mancuso, the language of this law was crafted by a diverse group of experienced animal control officers, veterinarians, government officials and animal lovers from rural areas to the largest cities and counties in the state.

"It meets California's needs and begins bringing this huge fiscal impact down in the most ethical manner," she said. "It's the right legislation at the right time. The needless killing of over 500,000 healthy animals and the waste of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars each year must end."

The California Healthy Pets Coalition includes the City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles Animal Services, California Animal Control Directors Association, California Veterinary Medical Association, California State Humane Association, Riverside County Animal Control, Stanislaus Animal Control, Madera County Animal Control, Clovis Animal Services, Laguna Beach Animal Control and many others.

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Lobbying for the bill last week, Gross pointed out to legislators the failure of the current "education-only" efforts by animal shelters to get people to spay and neuter their dogs and cats.

"I felt it was important to bring the perspective of those working in animal shelters and in rural counties to the discussion," Gross said.

"The way we have been handling pet overpopulation in the last decades is morally and ethically wrong, and fiscally irresponsible.

"The current method of requesting people voluntarily spay and neuter their pets, and encouraging them through reduced licensing fees is just not working." Gross said. "Our efforts to get people to do the right thing with their animals hasn't been effective. The tremendous number of animals put to death statewide each and every year reflect that."

Mancuso has spent the last year working with Los Angeles Animal Services general manger Ed Boks, and more recently with the bill's author, Assemblyman Lloyd E. Levine, D-Northridge, drafting the proposed law and pulling together support from groups like the California Animal Control Directors Association, California Veterinary Medical Association, California State Humane Association and others.

"Judie (Mancuso) has done a fabulous job of pulling all the facts and people together," Gross said. "She made the connection of the terrible waste of taxpayers' dollars and all the pets' lives lost. It's an obvious and logical solution."

Gross says the public tends to think of having puppies and kittens as no big deal, and views the animal shelters as the solution to their unwanted or surplus animal problem. A lot of people avoid shelters because they are viewed as depressing, crowded and smelly places.

According to shelter statistics from the fiscal year July 1, to June 30, 2006 the Madera County shelter took in a total of 8,436 animals. Of those 1,296 were adopted, 1,159 went to other rescue groups, and 5,071 were euthanized or destroyed.

"This number is continuously climbing each year," Gross said. "That's way too many that don't make it. In spite of all our efforts, 5,000-plus animals still lost their lives here in 2006."

On average Madera county shelter takes in at least 650 animals each month. This includes animals abandoned, captured by animal control officers or those dropped off at the shelter at all hours of the day and night. The shelter has room to house 150 animals, and has an average euthanasia rate of 70 percent.

An annex is under construction, but likely won't be open for at least two more months due to construction delays.

The emotional toll on shelter workers across the state is high, Gross said.

"People work in animal control because they love and care for animals. The heartbreak and the horror of putting down unwanted, healthy animals day after day is hard to bear for shelter workers," she said.

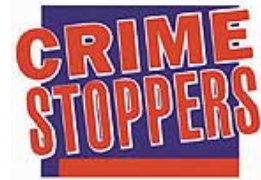
Gross hopes this law provides a better way to get people to realize how important an issue this is both morally and fiscally.

"It cost Madera County \$800,000 to fund animal control operations in 2006," Gross said. "That money could be better spent than processing, housing and then destroying these 5,000 animals last year."

Gross says reducing the huge pet overpopulation and stopping the breeding of unwanted dogs and cats is the best way to control the escalating costs and stop the slaughter. "If people faced the facts that we as taxpayers are paying such a high cost to destroy so many domestic dogs and cats, maybe then they would realize that a mandatory spay and neuter law is a good thing. As Madera County expands, the pet over population problem is also going to only grow."

According to the California Healthy Pets Act, spaying and neutering also results in significant public health and safety benefits, particularly the reduction of dangers caused by roaming stray animals, the transmission of rabies and communicable animal diseases and the occurrences of dog bites. Bill writers claim that unaltered dogs are three-times more likely to attack humans and other animals. Center for Disease Control statistics show that California suffers the nation's highest occurrences of dog bites, animal attacks and attack-related fatalities in the nation. Children are the most common victims.

According to the Humane Society of the United States, animals that are spayed or neutered make better pets. Roaming and fighting is reduced. Pets are healthier, with fewer reproductive and health problems.



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The mission of animal control is law enforcement, reunification of lost pets with owners, pet adoption, recovery of injured animals, and pet education. "Our mission should not be the wholesale euthanasia and disposal of unwanted dogs and cats just because people were not responsible enough to prevent unwanted litters. Responsibility rests with the pet owner. The best thing for the pet, the family and the community is to get the pet fixed." Gross said.

Madera County Animal Shelter has many animals placed with volunteers in foster homes because the shelter does not have the space to house all the puppies and kittens dropped off at the shelter.

"We have a hard-working, creative, dedicated staff," Gross said, "and a great group of volunteers that raise money, help with education, fostering and adoption efforts. But it's just not enough."

A 'fix-it' ticket for animals

If enacted the mandatory spay and neuter law would be like a "fix-it ticket" for animals, Gross said.

"We don't want to write tickets. We want cooperation and compliance. We want to be able to have the tools to ensure people get their animals fixed and not allow them to breed indiscriminately. Right now there is no incentive to stop the constant breeding. This is an enforcement tool to add to what we already do on a daily basis now.

"We would write a warning ticket, and provide the owner every option to get their animals fixed before proceeding to the fine," she said. The law would provide for discretion and flexibility of permits and fees at each of the local counties.

For those people who cannot afford spay and neutering at a veterinarian, most shelters have several low-cost spay and neuter programs.

"We have one spay program right now for as little as a \$20 co-pay," Gross said. "We cannot convince enough people to take advantage of it even at that low price. People just don't seem to want to take the time or the trouble to get their animals fixed."

In 1995, the County of Santa Cruz enacted a mandatory spay and neuter ordinance.

Mike McFarland, general manager of Animal Services for Santa Cruz County from July 2002 to June of 2006, said the law was highly successful. "We initially had some resistance from breeders," he said, "but in the 10 years since the law went into effect the number of unwanted animals had dropped over 50 percent. In 2002 we had about 10,000 animals come in, and in 2006 the number dropped to under 5,000. And that's during a period of 18 percent (human) population growth. It works," McFarland said.

The end of mutts?

The new law probably would not mean an end to mixed-breed dogs, Gross said.

"Even with this new law the problem of pet overpopulation will not disappear overnight," she said. "As with any new law, it will be a slow process of education, compliance and enforcement. There will be a gradual decline each year, with fewer animals having to be destroyed. There will be no shortage of mixed breeds in our life time."

People can help by making sure their own pets are fixed, and encourage their friends and neighbors to do so. Report pet owners that allow continual breeding of unwanted pets so that education and assistance can be provided, Gross suggested.

"Calling your local and state representatives and letting them know you support this bill would also be helpful," Gross said.

"Of course, when this law goes into effect we will be overwhelmed with requests for low cost financial spay and neuter assistance. Anyone that would like to help with that can make a donation to the Friends of Madera County Animal Shelter so we can continue to provide this option," Gross said.

Gross acknowledged that some people will resent being told what to do with their animals.

"To them I would say - come and spend a day in an animal shelter. See the process, and see the suffering for themselves. Putting a stop to the breeding of unwanted animals, is the best way to stop the euthanasia."

DJ Becker/The Madera Tribune

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