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Levine wants to put teeth in pet population control

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VAN NUYS - Assemblyman Lloyd Levine - who has proposed legalizing euthanasia, banning the incandescent light bulb and prohibiting cruelty to elephants - has done it again.

Now, he wants to make it mandatory to spay or neuter nearly every dog and cat in California.

But the bill, meant to combat the overpopulation of strays by requiring all dogs and cats to be spayed or neutered, has also drawn fire from breeders who would have to pay to register purebred pets.

The bill, if passed, would help save the 500,000 dogs and cats euthanized in California each year, said Levine, D-Van Nuys.

"We simply have a huge problem in the state with pet overpopulation," he said. "I can't tell you how many people have complained to me about cats defecating in their yards, flower beds ... and in sandboxes where kids play.

"It's a huge public-safety and public-health issue."

Assembly Bill 1634 was introduced Thursday and hasn't yet had a committee hearing.

Drafted by the office of City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, the California Health Pets Act has the strong support of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a former speaker of the Assembly.

A statewide spay-neuter law would follow the lead of Los Angeles County and states such as Rhode Island, which have already passed similar laws.

"This is part of our overall plan to make Los Angeles the first major metropolitan city in the nation to be no-kill," said Ed Boks, general manager of the city Animal Services Department, which spent about \$13million to process 42,000 animals last year and ultimately euthanized 19,000 dogs and cats.

"I'm very excited about it," added Woodland Hills resident Charlotte Laws, president of Directors of Animal Welfare, which has representatives in more than 50 neighborhood councils and community groups. "Low-cost spay-neutering on a massive scale is the No.1 way to achieve no-kill."

Breeders would pay

Some dog and cat enthusiasts, however, argue that the bill would force breeders - who would be required to pay unspecified "intact permits" - to go underground, and ultimately it would not make a dent in the growing population of strays.

They say breeders already go out of their way to avoid clogging local shelters with strays.

"It may be well-intentioned, but it's poorly aimed," said Diane Jacobsen, 65, of Sebastopol, who has been breeding Rhodesian Ridgebacks for 45 years.

If the bill becomes law, Jacobsen's dogs would qualify for an intact permit, which would exempt animals from spaying if they are purebred and registered with specific purebred kennel associations. Exceptions would also be made for animals used for professional purposes, including guide and police dogs.

The permit fee, which would apply to each pet, would be set by local animal-control agencies. In Los Angeles County, such permits cost breeders \$30 per dog. Other jurisdictions could potentially charge much more.

Pet owners who don't get permits and don't sterilize their pets by the time the animals are 4months old would face costly fines under the proposed bill.

Local animal-control agencies would retain money collected through fines and the new permit to help pay for subsidized spaying and neutering programs.

Bearing the brunt

While some Los Angeles-area breeders understand the need for such a law, they complain that they are being forced to bear the brunt for others' irresponsibility.

"It makes it really difficult for small-time breeders," said Krista Dragna of North Hollywood, a former animal-control officer who breeds Maltese dogs that sell for up to \$2,500 each.

"We're the ones who are getting hurt. We're the ones who are paying the price, but we're the ones who aren't" causing the problem, she said.

Sandra Whittaker, who breeds English bulldogs in Lancaster, agreed.

"I have mixed emotions," she said. "Part of me says, 'Yea for people who don't breed and have puppy after puppy after puppy, or kitten after kitten after kitten' - and the humane society is full of those (animals).

"But then you have pure breeders, like myself; we're responsible. And when we have to pay permits to keep our dogs intact, it's not cheap."

Proponents of the bill argue that the numbers are overwhelmingly in support of curtailing the number of dogs and cats that are being picked up by animal-control officers every year.

More than 841,000 dogs and cats entered animal shelters in 2005, and about half were euthanized, said Judie Mancuso, campaign director for a coalition of bill supporters.

She said local governments spend more than \$250million each year to care for and kill unwanted animals.

"We're not telling them they need to stop breeding," said Mancuso, who helped write the bill. "We're just saying, "Pay part of your burden to society, to the taxpayers."

Wire services contributed to this report.

More from Levine

Here are some of the other bills that Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, has proposed:

This session

Ban the sale of lamps that use incandescent bulbs by 2012.

Prevent cruelty to elephants, similar to a measure introduced last session.

Allow 16 federally recognized Indian tribal governments to participate in the Southern California Association of Governments.

Tighten penalties for anyone who does not report a handgun stolen or lost within a certain time frame.

Previous sessions

Fund a car-pool lane on the San Diego Freeway.

Create a San Fernando Valley statistical district.

Prohibit the commercial sale and transfer of cloned or genetically modified pets in California.

Label electronic appliances that use electricity in standby modes with how much power they use and the cost.