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Cutting down on unwanted pets

Some say spay-neuter legislation isn't answer to problem

By Zeke Barlow, zbarlow@VenturaCountyStar.com

March 13, 2007

Ever since Lloyd Levine introduced a bill in the state Legislature that would mandate that every cat and dog in the state be spayed or neutered — unless owners buy special permits — many animal enthusiasts have been howling that the bill with good intentions has gone astray.

Levine said the idea for the legislation was born after evaluating the high costs of taking in and killing the estimated 1 million animals that end up in shelters every year across the state.

"We have a huge problem in California," said Levine, D-Van Nuys. "It costs the state and local governments \$250 million to house, care and euthanize those that aren't adopted. You've got to figure out a solution."

He said Assembly Bill 1634, also called the California Healthy Pets Bill, would go a long way toward reducing costs and keeping animals from being unnecessarily killed. The only way that an owner could legally avoid having a pet spayed or neutered would be to get a permit, which some are estimating could cost as much as \$100 per animal. Levine said that estimate is too high.

Although most people acknowledge there is a problem, not everyone agrees that this is the way to deal with it.

"I understand why we are trying to do this; I applaud it," said Kathy Jenks, director of the Ventura County Department of Animal Regulation. "I just think we need to find a better way."

Jenks said Levine's bill tackles the pet population issue the wrong way.

The irresponsible people who don't license their animals now won't be any more likely to follow new rules, Jenks said. Those who are backyard breeders with questionable breeding practices now are no more likely to follow new rules, she said. And the permit for breeding dogs penalizes those who are often responsible owners, she said.

"We need to have an incentive to get people spaying and neutering, but I don't know if we are going to find those this way," she said.

She said the cost of taking care of and killing stray animals is not that high in Ventura County. Last year, her agency killed 1,621 dogs and 2,675 cats at a cost of about 30 cents an animal. Having animals spayed or neutered can cost as little as \$40 at some low-cost clinics, she said.

Chat rooms and blogs on the Internet are filled with discussions on the pros and cons of Levine's bill. The California Veterinary Medical Association supports the bill, as does a bird lovers' blog that says feral cats kill too many songbirds. But those in the dog breeding world are coming out strong against it, encouraging members to write their representatives.

"It is apparently targeting the legitimate breeders, and I don't see that it solves the problem of animals in the shelters at all," said Donna Hollingsworth, treasurer of the Ventura County Dog Fanciers Association.

Hollingsworth, who raises Samoyeds — the cute, fuzzy dogs that look like cotton balls run through the dryer — said many breeders could be severely impacted by additional fees. Although a purebred pooch can fetch well over \$1,000, the costs of producing a litter eat away at any profits, she said. Most people don't raise dogs for profit, but for the desire to make the breed better, she said.

"I think the intention is good, but it's not well-thought out," she said of the bill.

Betty Burnell, who has raised golden retrievers and harrier hounds, said that if the yearly permit is as much as \$100, it could hamper her ability to raise her beloved dogs.

"It would hurt me," said Burnell, of Ventura. "I'm sorry big government is stepping into a lot of stuff."

Levine said he has the responsibility to fight against unnecessary spending and his bill is a good way to do it. The bill still has to go to committee, and it could be weeks before any action is taken on it.

Jenks said that no matter what her opinion of the bill is, it's good to have some discussion of the problem of too many stray animals.

"If nothing else, it gets the dialogue going," she said. "There is a definite need to spay and neuter."