

Spay/neuter bill is a sensible fix

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EVERY year, nearly 1 million cats and dogs pass through the doors of animal-control agencies throughout California. And every year, hundreds of thousands of them - many perfectly healthy and adoptable - are euthanized by overcrowded shelters that are unable to find them good homes.

Here in Los Angeles, despite the fact that we have some of the best voluntary spay and neuter programs in the state, more than 19,000 dogs and cats were put down at city shelters over the past 12 months. Perhaps those numbers don't bother you, but this one might: Collectively, our state and local governments are spending \$250 million to house, care for, and ultimately kill about half a million dogs and cats each year.

To combat this taxpayer burden and overpopulation crisis, Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, has introduced the California Healthy Pets Act, which would require most pets in California older than four months of age to be spayed or neutered. Under Assembly Bill 1634, dog and cat owners who don't comply would be cited if their pet comes in contact with a local animal control officer. They would then be given time to spay or neuter their pets before a fine would be assessed. A portion of those fines would be used to expand the availability of free or low-cost spay and neuter programs.

In absence of this legislation, California will continue to take a piecemeal approach to pet overpopulation, and things will never really improve. But there is already a proven approach to solving this problem just waiting to be implemented - mandatory spay/neuter laws. And with a growing number of free and low-cost spay/neuter services up and down the state, mandatory spay/neuter laws should not pose a financial burden for pet owners.

Levine's legislation contains a number of common-sense exceptions, including for show and sporting dogs, law-enforcement dogs, dogs used in search and rescue, pets that are too old or in poor health, and guide, service and signal animals.

The bill is modeled after a highly successful mandatory spay and neuter ordinance that has been in place in Santa Cruz County since 1995. Within two years of the measure's enactment, the county began to see a noticeable reduction in the number of animals entering its shelters. Within eight years, despite a 15 percent growth in the county's human population, the number of animals entering its shelters was cut in half.

Despite cries from breeders that Levine's bill is too severe, there are counties that already have more stringent laws in place. And why shouldn't they?

Medical research shows that spayed or neutered cats and dogs live longer and healthier lives. Spaying and neutering protects and improves the health of pets by reducing or eliminating many health problems that are difficult and expensive to treat.

Depending on how you choose to look at the pet overpopulation problem in California, there are either 500,000 or 250 million good reasons to try to do something constructive to solve it. Crafted by a comprehensive coalition of animal-welfare experts, AB 1634 would establish California as a national leader in the humane care for animals, and save our state's taxpayers millions of their hard-earned dollars.

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