



Critics howl over Calif. pet-fixing bill

Proposed state law would require spaying, neutering of dogs and cats

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. - A bill that would require most dogs and cats in California to be spayed or neutered has brought howls of protest from breeders and threats from the American Kennel Club to pull the nation's second-largest dog show from the state.

The measure — which would be the most sweeping statewide pet-sterilization law in the country — passed the Assembly by a single vote earlier this month and goes next to the Senate, where its prospects are uncertain despite the support of animal-loving celebrities such as Pamela Anderson, Lionel Richie and retired "Price Is Right" host Bob Barker.

It is aimed at reducing the estimated 500,000 unwanted dogs and cats that are destroyed in California animal shelters each year.

"The more animals neutered and spayed, the fewer animals born, the fewer animals coming into our shelters, and fewer animals are euthanized," said Pat Claerbout, president of the California Animal Control Directors Association.

The bill — sponsored by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, a Democrat from Southern California who is also pushing to phase out the incandescent light bulb — would require pet owners to sterilize their dogs and cats by the time they are 4 months old, or face a \$500 fine.

Licensed breeders of purebreds would be exempt. But the law does not spell out which dog and cat breeds would be covered, and breeders wanting an exemption would have to apply for one from their local animal control authorities. The bill leaves it up to counties and cities to set the price.

Backyard breeders

Professional breeders complain that the measure would do little to curb "backyard breeders," that it would drive up their costs and entangle them in bureaucracy, and that it would amount to social engineering for animals.

"I think what's happening in California is socialism in its prime," said Janet Wahl, who lives near Sacramento and breeds Havanese and Yorkshire terriers. She said she fears the government will put itself in the position of deciding which dog breeds can reproduce and which cannot.

In the Sierra foothills, officials in rural Amador County complained it would be costly and burdensome for local governments to enforce the measure. And worse, they said, it could lead to the demise of the beloved mutt.

The American Kennel Club, which every December sponsors the Eukanuba National Championship in Long Beach, the nation's largest dog show after New York's Westminster Kennel Club event, has threatened to pull the internationally televised competition out of California if the bill succeeds.

Last year's show drew 28,000 people and was credited with injecting \$21.7 million into the local economy.

Its 5,000 member clubs have organized a national letter-writing campaign, while the 122-year-old organization has formed its first ever political action committee to fight what it calls "anti-dog laws" in California and elsewhere.

"Should this bill become law, I fear it could be a catalyst for other states. As the old saying goes, 'As California goes, so goes the nation,'" AKC chairman Ron Menaker said in a letter to members.

Animal shelter workers testified in heartbreaking detail about killing litters of kittens and lovable dogs because there are just too many to place in homes. And minutes before the Assembly voted, several wavering lawmakers got a telephone call from Barker, a longtime advocate of fixing pets.

"I had to do what I could to help make it possible for every dog and cat to have a good home," Barker said. "We desperately need it passed. The overpopulation is really tragic, and it's not just in California — it's all over the country."

25 states have sterilization laws

At least 25 states require that dogs and cats adopted from shelters be sterilized. Last year, Rhode Island passed a law requiring cats to be spayed or neutered by six months. Denver, Camden, N.J., New York and Fort Wayne, Ind., are among cities that have some kind of sterilization law.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has not taken a position on the California bill. He and his wife, Maria Shriver, own two male dogs — a Cockapoo named Sarge and a yellow Labrador retriever named Spunky.

Schwarzenegger press secretary Aaron McLear declined to say whether the pets were neutered — "out of respect" for the dogs.

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