

Pet act gets Valley's attention

Animal control officers to lobby for bill that is opposed by breeders.

By Marc Benjamin / The Fresno Bee

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San Joaquin Valley animal control officers, who have been lamenting the region's high death rates in animal shelters, will lobby state lawmakers this month to require owners to fix dogs and cats by the age of 4 months to keep strays in check.

The bill, known as the California Healthy Pets Act, is backed by animal control agencies but opposed by people who raise hunting and other working dogs and by purebred cat breeders, because of permits the owners say they will need for breeding.

Permit fees would be set by local agencies. Pet owners who breed without a permit could be fined. Proceeds from fines would be used for low-cost spay and neuter programs.

A hearing on the bill is scheduled for April 10 before the Assembly Committee on Business and Professions.

California taxpayers spend \$250 million each year to house or euthanize unwanted animals, according to the California Healthy Pets Coalition, a group backing the measure. The coalition also says that taxpayers save \$18.72 for every dollar spent to fix an animal.

Madera's county-run shelter takes in about 8,000 animals annually. To feed, house and euthanize animals costs about \$100 each, said Kirsten Gross, the shelter's director.

About 70% of those animals are euthanized -- "a terrible waste of taxpayers' money," Gross said.

"We are trying to promote this bill, which will give us a tool to slow down the pet overpopulation problem," she said. "Some people are making lots of money selling puppies and kittens, and they should be scrutinized under the same business regulations other businesses have to live with."

The Central California Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals euthanized 33,000 animals last year, with more than 43,000 coming through the Fresno shelter's doors.

Beth Caffrey, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals volunteer coordinator in Fresno, said local agencies are engaged in a postcard campaign and are seeking support letters from the public. She said the bill has some loopholes but is "a big step forward."

The bill is backed locally by the Clovis Pet Adoption Center, the HOPE Foundation spay/neuter clinic in Fresno, the Central Valley Coalition for Animals, Love of Animals in Visalia, and the Missing Pet Partnership in Clovis.

But the bill has opponents, like Madera County's Ed Fadeley, master of hounds with the Central California Sporting Dogs Association.

Fadeley breeds treeing walker coonhounds, and he does not have American Kennel Club papers for his animals. He said he gives his pups to hunters and ranchers.

"I just don't spread my dogs out on the street," Fadeley said.

He said his dogs are bred to hunt or chase away predatory animals, such as bears and bobcats, on ranches.

"Since there are no more steel traps, the dogs are a necessary tool to keep as a way to prevent animals from being harmed by predators," Fadeley said.

Porterville resident Judy Loflin, a border collie owner, said she raises her dogs to herd sheep and for herding contests. She said four months is too soon to alter her dogs because they're too young to demonstrate herding skills. It's also too soon to detect hip or other health problems that might impair their worth as breeding dogs, she said.

"The people who have working dogs and love their dogs do what they need to do without having a law," said Loflin, a member of the San Joaquin Valley Border Collie Association. "Why should I pay for permission to breed my dog when I am doing things right?"

Members of the Cat Fanciers' Association, a purebred cat registry, also oppose altering cats at

MORE INFORMATION

Bill outline

AB 1634 requires:

-- All dogs and cats to be fixed by the age of four months

-- Breeders will be required to have permits

-- Local agencies will determine the cost for permits

-- Violators can be fined, with proceeds going to spay and neuter programs

Hearing: April 10 before the Assembly Committee on Business and Professions

an early age.

The group supports spay and neuter programs, said Joan Miller of San Diego, the association's national legislative coordinator. She said some communities that already require breeding permits are charging up to \$150 for the permit.

So long as people take care of their cats, they should be free to decide whether to spay or neuter their animals without government intervention, she said.

She said unsterilized cats are difficult to live with, which is why conscientious cat owners fix their animals.

"The last thing people want is a litter of kittens on their hands," she said.

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