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Sandy Ettinger: Spay-neuter bill desperately needed

There is a huge oversupply of family pets. More than 430,000 of them die in California shelters every year, not for anything they've done, but simply because no one wants them.

There are two main ways to reduce an oversupply of anything. One is to limit production and the other is to destroy the excess. We've been doing the latter for far too long and it's time for a change. Assembly Bill 1634 mandates spaying or neutering all California cats and dogs with exemptions for service, law enforcement and ill animals as well as those produced by legitimate and licensed breeders.

When there is too much of anything the result is waste. If there's an oversupply of oranges we can just discard them. But this is about living beings that don't want to suffer and die any more than you or I do. So let's give them a break. And let's give ourselves one, too, since California taxpayers spend more than \$250 million a year on shelter operations. And that doesn't include huge amounts spent on shelter construction.

We also must improve the working conditions of shelter personnel. The California Animal Control Directors Association is a sponsor of 1634 and support among shelter workers is nearly unanimous. Their job stress is enormous. We have a duty to improve their working conditions and reduce the occupational stress of those who care for and are forced to euthanize unwanted pets. Who among us would trade jobs with them?

Those in opposition argue that 1634 is unenforceable and won't change anything. While 1634 won't completely stop careless breeding, it will help in the same sense that speed limits don't stop speeding, but make driving incrementally safer. Basic common sense dictates that mandatory spay/neuter will reduce the number of homeless pets. In Santa Cruz, where this has been the law since 1995, shelter admissions and euthanasia have decreased dramatically. As a result, incalculable suffering has been prevented and a lot of taxpayer money has been saved.

There are also those who say that 1634 punishes responsible breeders. But 1634 merely requires that breeders obtain a license and pay a fee to be set by each county. In Santa Cruz, it's \$40 a year. This will, of course, also require all breeders to be like every other legitimate business and operate "above the radar" on matters such as zoning and tax compliance. They should also pay at least a tiny fraction of the cost of a problem for which they are partly responsible since a non-trivial percentage of their "inventory" and their offspring end up in a public shelter at some point in their lives. As a side point, 1634 does not outlaw raising mixed-breed animals; licensed breeders are not restricted to selling purebreds.

Finally, opponents also argue that 1634 is an unfair restriction on our personal freedom. But we don't have the freedom to drive the wrong way on the freeway and we shouldn't be free to indiscriminately produce hundreds of thousands of family pets that won't have a decent life. There are seven cats and dogs born in the U.S. for every human birth and there aren't enough homes for them. The hobbies and business interests of the few should not reign supreme over innocent family pets whose births resulted from indifference as to their fate.

For anyone opposed to 1634, the Santa Cruz SPCA will schedule a visit to a high-kill shelter in the Bay Area where they will spend a day having an up-close and personal experience of the status quo they want to preserve. Just let us know, we'll make the arrangements. For the rest of us, please visit CAHealthyPets.com and lend your support. This Web site will give you the latest information and ways to help.

In sum, AB 1634 must become law. We, and the family pets who depend on us, deserve this important reform that is worthy of a humane society.

Sandy Ettinger is a board member of the Santa Cruz Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Lisa Carter is the executive director of the SPCA.

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