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Pet Talk: 'Fixing' the overpopulation problem

By Dr. Jon Klingborg

A bill has just been introduced that will require all pets over 4 months of age to be spayed or neutered, unless it has been registered as a "purebred" with specific groups. If passed into law, AB1634 is intended to reduce the over 400,000 animals that are euthanized in California animal shelters every year.

Opponents of AB1634 seem to fall into four different groups: those that think this bill 1) discriminates against them, 2) discriminates against certain pets, 3) goes to far, 4) doesn't go far enough.

Dog breeder groups opposed to AB1634 feel that they will bear an unfair burden of this new law. The bill will require dog breeders to purchase a breeder's permit after they have proven that their animal is registered as a purebred. To date, I have not heard anyone suggest a dollar amount for this permit -- these folks are just plain against the notion of having to pay anything for the "right" to breed their pet.

However, breeders may have forgotten their high school economics class about supply vs. demand. If there are fewer puppies or kittens available, then the price for those pets will increase.

Breeders who have played by the rules will be able to charge more for their animals, and the cost of a permit will be easily repaid.

Some cite opposition to AB1634 because it unfairly

discriminates against 'mixed breed' dogs. I agree that mutts can be great pets. Though it would be fantastic if this bill ended the euthanasia of 400,000 animals overnight and California subsequently faced a "mutt shortage," I find this scenario a little hard to believe. Irresponsible pet breeding will still take place, mutts will still be born, and mixed breed dogs will still deserve to find good homes.

Other opponents feel that this bill goes too far. They seem to believe that this bill infringes on the "right" to freely choose whether or not to have their pet fixed. These people don't want to pay a fee to keep their pet intact. Well, we all pay for the "right" to do certain things. Businesses pay business licenses, drivers pay a fee for their license and car registration, etc. Why should dog or cat breeders be exempt from this? Though there are many responsible breeders of pets, there are far more who aren't responsible. I encounter on a daily basis people who want to breed their dog because "it would be fun for the kids" or "everyone loves her personality."

Statewide, animal control programs cost the taxpayers about \$250 million every year. Do we all have the "right" to continue to breed our pets "just because," or should we attempt to curb the waste of animal lives and human resources?

Some naysayers are against AB1634 because it doesn't go far enough. They correctly point out that this bill doesn't have any impact on the unowned feral cats that are reproducing in every community, and we shouldn't adopt a bill until it does. Some problems are so big that they can't all be solved at once.

County animal control agencies have made feral cats a low priority because they have other, more immediate problems to resolve. Animal control agencies would tackle the feral cat issue if they had the resources to do so. By reducing the number of stray dogs and litters being dumped at the pound, they may finally have the ability to solve that problem as well.

Depending on your perspective, there are either 400,000 or 250 million good reasons to try and do something constructive about the pet overpopulation problem. AB1634 may not be perfect, but it is the most reasonable approach I've seen in a long time.

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Posted on 03/10/07 00:30:00

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