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Supervisors order study of mandatory spay-neuter rule

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Kern County supervisors, saying "enough is enough," ordered study of a mandatory spay-neuter rule Tuesday in light of rising animal euthanasia rates.

The Animal Control Commission meets at 6 p.m. the third Wednesday of each month in the meeting room on the first floor of the Kern County Public Services Building, 2700 M St. in Bakersfield.

The next meeting will be March 19.

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In 2007, Kern County killed 18,669 animals — more than the city of Los Angeles, which has 3 million more people than Kern.

After three years of progress, animal overpopulation growth has overwhelmed reforms at the county shelters. *The Californian* reported the rising kill numbers and that little has been done to slow them on its Web site Friday and paper Sunday.

"The issue has begun to manage us rather than us managing it," Supervisor Mike Maggard said. "Enough is enough."

Supervisors asked the Kern County Animal Control Commission to deliver a proposed ordinance that it's been considering for two years to the board by June 10.

And that ordinance, supervisors ruled, should contain mandatory spay-neuter.

In the face of stringent opposition, the commission rejected the concept nearly two years ago as something Kern County wasn't ready for.

Since then the commission has focused on creating permits for people and businesses that keep large numbers of animals.

Commission member Janice Anderson said Tuesday she will be glad to stand up to supervisors and explain Kern does not have the animal control manpower to enforce a mandate.

"We need to make (spay and neuter) financially available to the segment of the community that can't afford to do it on their own," Anderson said.

But it's the Board of Supervisors, not the animal control commission, that will have the final say on any mandatory spay-neuter rule.

Maggard was the one who recommended considering the rule Tuesday.

His motion, approved by all the supervisors except an absent Jon McQuiston, requires the commission to return a mandatory spay-neuter rule to supervisors in June, whether commission members like it or not.

David Price, director of the county agency that manages Kern County Animal Control, said supervisors need to understand there will be a dollar cost to implement mandatory spay-neuter.

"Any recommendation staff makes to the commission and the board will have to have an enforcement and low-cost spay-neuter component," Price said. "It goes back to what I told them before. Whatever we develop as an option is going to have a resource component."

Mandatory spay-neuter laws, which require all pets to be sterilized, are deeply controversial, opposed by animal breeders, trainers and showers.

A statewide version of the law, proposed by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, was stalled in the California state senate by a massive lobbying assault in 2007.

Judie Mancuso, a Laguna Beach animal activist who is spearheading Levine's Healthy Pets Act, said she was excited to hear Kern County is considering mandatory spay-neuter.

She said Healthy Pets is being revised to gain support from senators.

"We should be going to committee maybe in April, maybe after recess," she said.

Mancuso said the animal overpopulation problem has become so big California must address the only logical solution.

"The one thing that is absolutely preventable is these unwanted litters — these animals breeding on the streets," Mancuso said. "We should not be spending all this money to house and kill all these animals."

And, she said, mandatory spay-neuter would make an impact, with or without more enforcement money.

Some animal owners would comply voluntarily because it's the law and the ones who wouldn't would risk being caught and facing the consequences, Mancuso said.

"What law do we enforce 100 percent?" Mancuso asked rhetorically.

Maggard called for the mandatory spay-neuter rule to provide exceptions for breeders and animals used in the course of business. Those exemptions are part of most existing mandatory spay-neuter laws, such as in Los Angeles and Santa Cruz.

Supervisor Ray Watson said the animal overpopulation problem has been going on far too long.

"It's not going to get better until we get tougher," he said.

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