

LOCAL NEWS

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Kern's euthanization rates rising again

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Death comes softly to the tan dog with the liquid brown eyes.

PHOTOS:



Photo by Felix Adamo

Pet populations are on the rise again forcing Kern County Animal Control to euthanized more animals after few years of decline.



Photo by Felix Adamo

A dog looks from behind the fence at one of the kennels at Kern County Animal Control.

The needle goes in.

The injection is made.

And the dog, his muzzle wrapped with a leash to prevent a final bite, slumps over dead.

Animal care workers pull his corpse five feet across the concrete floor into a small pile of other dead dogs.



Photo by Felix Adamo

An animal care worker, who did not wish to be identified, gently pets a shepherd mix before the dog is euthanized at Kern County Animal Control.



Photo by Felix Adamo

In a few seconds, this male shepherd mix will be another dog added to the group of dogs, upper right, that have been euthanized at Kern County Animal Control. Kern County, after three years of controversy and reform, still hasn't embraced a plan that would one day make the recently euthanized tan dog the last healthy, friendly animal dragged into that pile.

LOSING GROUND

In 2004, newspaper stories and lawsuits highlighted Kern's tragic euthanasia rates and the public responded.



Photo by Felix Adamo

Felix Adamo / The Californian A male shepherd mix is "put to sleep" by euthanasia at Kern County Animal Control. The process takes only a matter of seconds before the dog has expired.

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BLOGS:

- How should we tackle animal overpopulation? Weigh in on the "Quirks of the County" blog.

Animal adoptions grew. Kern County Animal Control partnered with rescue groups to save thousands of shelter animals. County supervisors doubled the animal control budget to \$4.6 million.

Euthanizations decreased from 18,171 in the 2004-2005 fiscal year to 16,743 in 2006-2007.

But nobody, private nor public, did much to address the cause of the high kill rates — the tide of animals flowing into county shelters.

So by mid-2007, animal population growth began to erase the three years of progress the community made to save animals.

Shelter kill numbers have topped last year's totals by more than 100 animals in each of the months between June 2007 and January 2008.

In all of calendar year 2007, Kern County euthanized 18,669 animals — two of every three in its care. That's 3,660 more animals than the city of Los Angeles killed last year, despite L.A. having 3 million more people than Kern.

And it's 498 more than died in 2004-2005.

"We're being overwhelmed by the growth of our communities and the inadequacy of our current program," said David Price, director of the agency that oversees animal control.

'OVER MY DEAD BODY'

Bakersfield resident Kerri Hanson believes spaying and neutering animals is the best solution to overpopulation.

Nobody disputes that.

Hanson told the Kern County Animal Control Commission in February it should mandate spay-neuter.

She got an icy reception.

"Over my dead body," murmured Tehachapi dog trainer Teri Kahn from the back of the room.

"If my government is going to tell me, at a certain age, I've got to take my female (dog) and submit her to government-required sterilization, doesn't that sound awfully draconian?" Kahn asked rhetorically in a subsequent interview. "What we're saying is 'You're too stupid to think for yourself, so government is going to think for you.'"

The commission rejected mandatory spay-neuter nearly two years ago — with little debate or investigation.

"Enforcement and education are the biggest things we have going forward," said commission member and animal trainer Janice Anderson. "Mandatory spay-neuter is not the answer."

Hanson said animal breeders have packed commission meetings to make it seem like the general public doesn't want mandatory spay neuter.

Price and Supervisor Don Maben say mandatory spay neuter may one day be the answer, but not now.

"I'm going to need more enforcement capacity (animal control officers) or we will be subject to the legitimate criticism that we need to enforce the laws we've got before we put new laws in place," Price said.

But it has been done. The Los Angeles City Council recently passed a mandatory spay and neuter law because, it believed, making unaltered animals illegal was the only way to get kill numbers to zero.

A statewide version of the law — proposed in 2007 by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine — would take the county off the hook by requiring spay and neuter, Price said. That Healthy Pets Act is stalled in

a Senate committee after being approved by the Assembly last year.

Maben said he prefers a comprehensive state law. A county ordinance wouldn't affect incorporated cities like Bakersfield, Shafter and Taft.

CHANGE AGENTS

The Board of Supervisors created the Kern County Animal Control Commission two years ago to investigate and advocate for solutions to the county's killing problem.

So far it has worked to require permits for keeping large numbers of pets and to increase shelter fees on unaltered animals. The rules are designed to fight animal abuse and hoarding.

But in all reality, Price said, the ordinance changes will do little to solve the animal overpopulation problem.

And even those changes have been stalled for months by vocal opposition from animal breeders and trainers.

"Right now I just want them to get through so we have some regulations on hoarders and kennels and move on (to) the next (issue)," Maben said.

Board member Anderson thinks the new rules will help pay for education, enforcement and low-cost sterilizations.

"We need money so we can have manpower," she said.

Price said enforcing the ordinance might even be a waste of his staff's time.

"I would rather have some sort of program that gets at the high numbers of animals. I would rather (officers) did community education rather than chasing people with six to 10 animals to make sure they have a permit," he said.

FIRST STEPS

Denise Haynes, county animal control chief, said some sort of local low-cost spay and neuter program has to be created.

Her department is just now beginning to work with local veterinarians to create a voucher system that would distribute \$100,000 this year to people who need help paying for spay and neuter surgeries.

But that money, most of which sits unspent eight months into the county's fiscal year, would only reduce the cost of a surgery by around \$60, Price said. Surgery on a large female dog can cost \$200 or more from a local veterinarian.

Several local non-profits also offer such vouchers.

And the Fresno-based HOPE Animal Foundation picks up 100 animals from Kern County a couple times each month to be spayed and neutered up north at half the cost Kern County vets charge.

But right now, that's it.

"People all the time say, 'Well the county should have a spay/neuter program,'" Haynes said. "Are you willing to pay a special assessment for it? Are you willing to have fewer paved roads? Are you willing to have fewer sheriff's officers so the money can come here?"

Voluntary spay-neuter programs can make a big difference.

Years of low-cost clinics and programs helped Los Angeles drop its kill rate to 15,009 animals from more than 37,833 in 2001. A full-time, low-cost spay-neuter clinic in Kern County wouldn't bring immediate results.

"It takes at least six years to make a difference," said Whitney Mayeda of the HOPE Animal Foundation.

SOLUTIONS

Nothing Kern County can do will stop the killing tomorrow. And any solution paid for by the county is going to cost taxpayers.

Los Angeles' Department of Animal Services has a budget of \$21.3 million this year. Kern County is spending only \$4.6 million.

"There really aren't any easy solutions," Price said.

But there is a problem.

And, Price said, Kern County and its citizens have a moral responsibility to implement a solution.

"By any rational measure the euthanization rates we have in this county are unconscionable," he said.

Kern County animal control: By the numbers

28,241: Animals cared for by Animal Control in 2007

18,669: Animals euthanized

3,145: Animals adopted

1,692: Animals returned to their owners

Reasons for euthanization

3,555: Dogs that failed behavior tests

3,354: Puppies and kittens that were too young

2,474: Animals that were feral

2,333: Animals too sick

Presumably thousands: Animals killed because there isn't enough room in shelters. The county doesn't keep track of exactly how many.

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