

Legal Watch

Does cat licensing work? Experts from both sides of the issue weigh in.

Beth Kalet

Posted: Tue Feb 20 00:00:00 PST 2001

"Of the municipalities comparable to San Diego, the worst spike in euthanasia we found was L.A. County, where cats reclaimed fell 32 percent the year they instituted cat licensing," he says. As a result of these studies, San Diego's Board of Supervisors rejected cat licensing in 1994. In San Francisco, the SF/SPCA, "came to similar conclusions ... and has become the largest city in the U.S. to have a no-kill policy," Eigenhauser says.

An important consideration is whether licensing pushes owners to spay or neuter pets, Miller says. As many as six studies show 86-87 percent of all owned cats are already neutered and spayed, she says. "So it really boils down to a very small percentage of owned cats not [being] neutered and spayed." As a means of limiting unwanted litters, though, statistics may not tell the whole story. Other studies show "that a number of cats had a litter before being spayed," Miller says.

Licensing could have the biggest implications on feral cat colonies, because no one "owns" these cats although some people take responsibility for them. Cat licensing programs are generally modeled after those for dogs, but that is not appropriate, Eigenhauser says. "Dogs are either owned or not owned," he says. Should caretakers of feral cats be taxed for keeping them alive? Should they be encouraged to help round cats up for sterilization? Or will they give up because they can't afford the licenses?

In handling the problem of feral cats or any cat not intended to breed, Miller says early altering is the solution. This is becoming more acceptable.

While licensing laws may limit the number of cats a breeder can keep at one time, CFA's Miller says most breeders do not regard themselves as business people, rather as hobbyists. Therefore, they often ignore the taxation and regulation. "I don't know of many breeders who are licensing their cats," she says.

Many people tacitly agree some laws are made to be broken, too much regulation strangles a free society and one of our nation's biggest problems is government getting involved where it doesn't belong. Does cat licensing constitute too much government, as its opponents claim? Or is it really a benign method of ensuring safety for all cats, as its advocates believe? Perhaps a middle ground exists, which is the tack taken by ACA.