

Legal Watch

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

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You go to your town hall, fill out some paper work, pay a fee and voila - you have a license for your cat. No big deal, right? You figure you've made it easier for your cat to be found if it gets lost and you may be helping the thousands of cats killed in shelters each year. Who could argue against such noble causes? The idea of licensing and the issues of freedom versus responsibility and unwanted taxation have been around for a long time: They are as old as America itself.

All across the country, the topic of cat licensing elicits strong reactions. Opponents say it's just another unnecessary form of taxation. Proponents say it helps control rabies and the problem of feral cat overpopulation. Pet owners and breeders simply flout registration and licensing laws they consider a nuisance, says Joan Miller of Suisun City, Calif., legislative coordinator for the Cat Fanciers' Association, the largest registry of pedigreed cats.

"It's like the 55-mph speed limit. Everybody does 70," says George Eigenhauser of San Diego, Calif., Southwest regional director for CFA.

Jack Kopf, a CFA registered breeder in Glen Rock, N.J., says he has little problem with the law in his town. The limit is six adult cats per household. "Six cats underfoot are enough for me," he says.

Still, such laws are a rallying cry for many.

As a means of keeping feral cats under control, they are the wrong tack to take, says Becky Robinson, national director of Alley Cat Allies, a national feral cat coalition based in Washington, D.C., that promotes trap-neuter-return efforts. If the aim is to promote responsible pet ownership and enforce ID for pets, the laws are pointless, Miller says. Pet owners prove their responsibility by caring for and neutering their own cats, she says. "Most of us [CFA and its advocates] have no problem with the idea of identification, but we don't really consider identification and licensing synonymous," Miller says.

Can cat licensing really accomplish goals of responsible pet ownership?

"That's the \$64,000 question," Eigenhauser says. Many cat-licensing opponents see it as nothing more than a way to produce revenue. "The stated purpose of ID tags is so [owned pets] can be returned to their owner, but it just becomes another way to tax," Eigenhauser adds.