

Opening Space

Don't Break Out the Champagne — Yet

We drank champagne at my local kennel club's last meeting, and I'm sure we were not the only dog people to celebrate the news that the potentially disastrous California spay and neuter bill AB 1634 was withdrawn by its sponsors just before a Local Government Committee hearing on July 11.

You could almost hear the sigh of relief heaved by dog people everywhere. The course of development has been followed with intense interest far outside our state borders, even abroad. As they say, when California sneezes the rest of the world catches a cold... and what we do here tends to be copied elsewhere, for better or worse.

It's a natural reaction to celebrate the achievements of all those who helped make it clear to both legislators and the public what a bad piece of lawmaking this bill would be. However, it isn't over yet. The fact is that the bill most likely will be brought back in some form, and while it's understandable that we were all taken by surprise when it was first introduced there is no excuse for being unprepared the second time around. This extends far beyond California; no matter where you live you may expect your right to keep, breed and show dogs — however responsibly — to come under attack sooner or later.

10 Million Killed in Shelters

The fact is that there are too many dogs, and a lot of people are concerned about this. Nobody knows exactly how many dogs there are in the U.S.; depending on the source the figures range from 35 to 40 million to more than 60 million. If all these dogs were responsibly kept it wouldn't be a problem, but unfortunately that's not the case: too many are the result of unplanned backyard breeding, abandoned, strays and eventually end up in shelters. A lucky few get a second chance with a new owner, but for many the shelter is the end of the road. Just how many dogs are killed in shelters is not known either, but there is little doubt that the figure is in the millions. (The club meeting mentioned above was held at a local shelter; during an impromptu hands-on report by their staff we learned that an average of 1,000 dogs have to be put down in that shelter alone every year. I have a hard time accepting the horrifying official estimate of around 10 million animals euthanized annually in the U.S., but multiplying the deaths in our local small-town shelter with the national figures I came to the conclusion that the all-over total must be substantially correct.)

How you deal with the fact that so many animals are killed every single day of the year is your decision — although I would suggest sparing a thought, a few dollars or even some volunteer hours for your local shelter. There's no question that the only real solution to this situation is the spaying and neutering of as many pets as possible. I hope we can all agree on that, regardless of different opinions on how that should be achieved.

Good Breeders and Bad Ones

Beyond that, our primary objective in preparing for future attempts to restrict pet ownership must be to make it clear that we, as responsible breeders, owners and exhibitors are not part of the problem. Dog shows contribute millions of dollars to the state's economy each year, and breeding dogs the way most of us do is an activity that should be encouraged, not censored. We do not sell pet puppies without a spay/neuter contract; we do not breed more puppies than we can find good homes for; and we take back any puppies we sold that for some reason get into trouble. The term "breeder" is a red flag in many quarters, and we must make it clear both to the public and to the legislators that there is a huge distinction between a responsible hobby breeder, someone who breeds for the love of it and not in order to make money, and the commercial breeders who are the antithesis of everything we stand for.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must support the organizations which represent our interests. If there isn't a lobbying group or a watchdog (!) organization in your state, please help form one to keep an eye on evolving legislation. We have several such groups in California now — some purely regional, others national in scope, some dating before AB 1634, others created as a direct result of the legislative threat. I'm not going to tell you which one you should support — check their agendas and choose the one that most closely mirrors your own convictions — but I will tell you that I am convinced that moderation wins and a "no compromise" attitude — however appealing in some ways — will eventually backfire.

Supporting the Activists

For the record, the Los Angeles Times in a July 16 article gave a great deal of credit for the bill's preliminary defeat to the political action committee PetPAC, formed in May this year but already with a reported 35,000 supporters. PetPAC's founder, Bill Hemby, is an active Borzoi breeder and exhibitor and helped raise more than \$200,000 to defeat the

bill. Christi McDonald wrote in last month's Dogs in Review about Concerned Dog Owners of California, consisting of a group of dedicated and highly qualified active dog people: judges, handlers and breeders. They are conducting a series of extremely informative symposia in conjunction with shows about how to deal with legislators and have enlisted the help of both public relations and lobbyist professionals.

I make no apologies for devoting so much space to the fallout from AB 1634. It's potentially the most damaging legislation imaginable for our sport, and although for the moment we've "won," we need to prepare ourselves to defend our right to do what we love doing.

So much else to talk about... The AKC/Eukanuba National Show, the question of what a "breeder judge" really is (I've noticed the term used in the oddest places recently), what happens when a major win is disallowed, and much more. But all that will have to wait...

Have fun with your dogs!

Bo Bengtson, Editor-at-Large