

Washington State Considers Cat, Dog Food Fee

Proposed legislation would establish a spay-neuter program for low-income pet owners.

Posted: January 31, 2009, 5 a.m. EST

Washington state legislators have developed a bill that would establish a companion animal spay-neuter assistance program funded by a special fee on pet food. The Senate Agriculture & Rural Economic Development Committee scheduled a public hearing Jan. 27 in Olympia.

Senate Bill 5329 states tens of thousands of stray and homeless dogs and cats are handled by Washington's animal care and control agencies and other animal welfare organizations each year, costing millions of dollars. The most effective and humane way to reduce the number of animals dying in shelters, according to the bill, is to manage the pet population through a targeted, statewide spay and neuter surgery network.

Such a program, the bill states, should be funded through a fee, which is "practical, administratively feasible, and targeted at the class of Washington residents that is most responsible for companion animals and their impact on our communities: Owners of cats and dogs."

If passed, the bill would establish a companion animal spay-neuter program for low-income individuals. The program would also fund the spaying and neutering of feral and free-roaming cats.

The program would be funded by a fee on pet foods distributed in Washington. The \$57.50-per-ton fee would be paid by initial distributors or responsible buyers of pet food. Specialty pet food and quantities under one ton per reporting period would be exempt from the fee.

The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) issued an alert about the proposed measure in which it calls the fee unprecedented and claims no "tax" is currently imposed in the U.S. on pet food for the purpose of funding programs beyond state feed inspection programs.

PIJAC also states the imposition of the fee would result in "significant increases" in the cost per pound of dog and cat food at retail level.

According to PIJAC, "such a radical proposal should prove troubling for responsible pet owners since the proponents explicitly place blame on responsible pet owners' shoulders for an apparent feral cat problem in Washington."

It contends the problems cited in the bill affect all members of the community, and the cost of any program aimed at reducing the feral cat population should be shared by the community as a whole.