

California Assembly Passes Spay/Neuter Bill

Spay/neuter legislation would make sterilization mandatory for all California pets more than four months old.

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California's State Assembly narrowly passed the controversial Healthy Pets Act (AB 1634) on Wednesday, which would set statewide spay and neuter laws for most cats and dogs more than four months old.

The 41-38 vote moved the legislation to the state's Senate, where the bill has been assigned to a committee.

The bill has sparked considerable controversy in the state, ranging from its merits as a way to control pet populations to more philosophical debates regarding the role of government itself.

Lloyd Levine, the bill's author, says one million unwanted and abandoned cats and dogs are born in California each year, and organizations spend \$250 million annually to care or euthanize these animals. About 500,000 are euthanized annually, says Levine.

Supporters of the legislation argue the population problem is caused by "irresponsible breeders" and that breeders with business licenses would be able to get "intact animal" permits. Breed groups, however, contend many responsible, hobby breeders are too small to require business licenses.

If passed, the legislation would place enforcement responsibility on local jurisdictions but does not provide state funds to do so. The legislation assumes that costs borne by local agencies to enforce the regulation would be supported by annual permits and civil penalties, and that enforcement activities would be conducted in the course of the agencies' other duties and based on complaints.

Critics contend that those funds would be insufficient to cover the program's costs and that local jurisdictions would be forced to pay the difference. In addition, some pet owners could skip the licensing process and provisions such as rabies vaccinations, rather than spay or neuter their pets, critics of the legislation contend.

Although the legislation exempts cats and dogs from other states traveling to California for a variety of reasons, including dog and cat shows, the American Kennel Club says passage of the legislation would send the message that AKC events are not welcome in California and could hurt the state's economy.

Also, the AKC/Eukanuba National Championship is currently scheduled for Dec. 1-2 in Long Beach, Calif. About 300,000 competitors, many from outside the state, participated in AKC events, including all-breed dog shows, agility events and field trials, in California in 2006.

The Senate has until Sept. 14, 2007, to pass the bill for it to be enacted in 2008.