



The Cat Fanciers' Association, Inc.

"World's Largest Registry of Pedigreed Cats"

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

MANDATORY SPAY/NEUTER

The Wrong Answer for Cat Lovers

Legislation is often written without a clear understanding of the unintended consequences it may bring. A "Mandatory Spay/Neuter" ordinance may seem like a quick fix to decrease shelter populations. Instead it may not only fail to address the situation but could create even more troubles and harm to pets.

The first step in addressing a problem is to define it. It is an easy assumption to make that cats enter shelters because of failure of owners to alter their pets. However, the facts do not support this supposition. Many owned cats are taken to shelters because of behavior issues, poor breed choices, job or housing problems, illness or old age. Numerous studies now show that 85% to 92% of all owned cats in the U.S. are altered already.

However, it is the unowned/free-roaming cats who primarily contribute to the homeless cat population. Mandatory spay/neuter ordinances are intended to deter and penalize pet owners. No matter how severe the punishment, cats with no owners continue to reproduce on the streets adding to the feral cat population. These laws have no impact on the unchecked reproduction of unowned/free roaming/feral cats - the greatest reason for shelter euthanasia. Trap/neuter/return programs have proven to be successful in reducing the numbers of feral cats. A bad ordinance will only divert limited resources away from real solutions to the problem.

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One unintended consequence of mandatory spay/neuter laws is that they often define ownership to include people who feed or care for strays. This drives away citizens who might try to help care for the strays, but are afraid of being penalized under the law as an owner. What about the pregnant stray cat who arrives at the door? Up to 34% of all cat owners obtain their cats as strays. A well meaning cat lover could be penalized for an act of kindness. Those who feed these cats must be encouraged and helped to sterilize more of them. Instead of driving away help, communities need to invest in solutions that will keep these cats and their unweaned kittens out of the shelter.

Proponents may offer the option of a "breeder license" or "intact permit" to allow for limited ownership of unaltered pets. An example is this year's New Mexico House Bill 1106, called the "Pet Owner Responsibility Act". It would, with limited exception, require the surgical sterilization of every cat or dog over the age of 6 months. An intact permit could be obtained for certain show animals entered into competition at least once a year, along with certain other requirements. Intact permits would be good for only 1 year and personal information must be passed on to animal control when licensing.

Cats are not small dogs. Because of the differences in cats' reproductive physiology they must be either bred or spayed to remain healthy. Cats are not purposely kept intact unless for breeding purposes. Mature breeding cats lose coat, go into heat, and have other issues that prevent them from being shown while breeding. No cat will ever qualify for the intact permit based on show requirements which were obviously written with dogs in mind.

Entire breeds of cats could well be forced into extinction by these laws.

Mandatory spay/neuter laws are often passed with no consideration of animal husbandry requirements. Some rare and exotic breeds are kept alive by a devoted following of people who value them for their distinct personalities and beauty. A sampling of these, with the total numbers registered worldwide with CFA in 2005, include:

- the mysterious and ancient Korat (93);
- the Turkish Angora, saved from extinction once before by a breeding program in the Ankara Zoo (250);
- the unique curly coated La Perm (24).

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A single breeder dedicated to these and other rare breeds who is forced to give up breeding can mean a devastating blow to the health of the entire breed. The loss of genetic diversity may be irreplaceable. An ill-conceived mandatory spay/neuter system can easily mean the final straw to hobbyists. An unintended consequence could lead to the extinction of a rare and beautiful breed.

Most breeder licensing schemes with "standards of care" assume inspection of large, commercial activities. For example, the Federal PAWS legislation that failed in 2006 would have provided for USDA licensing of many hobby breeders. USDA regulations assume separate caging in sterile environments, and all but prohibit carpet and furniture in areas occupied by the cats and dogs! These regulations are ill-suited when pets are kept in a home. Most hobby breeders would be reluctant to have animal control officers coming unannounced to inspect their bedrooms. Home-based hobby breeders, used to treating pets as part of the family will be unable to comply, and forced to stop raising cats and dogs. Health and socialization of pets will suffer when cat breeding can only be commercial.

As private hobby breeders leave the community those who want pedigreed cats and purebred dogs will turn to the Internet and go outside the area. This means less interaction between the pet owner and the breeder. If private home breeders stop preserving their breeds the public will be unable to obtain cats of the breeds they want for their family or lifestyle. Pedigreed cats/purebred dogs will become too costly for many or unavailable. Studies show cats who meet pet owners' expectations have less risk of being relinquished to shelters. So an unintended consequence of mandatory spay/neuter can be an increase in relinquishment to shelters due to failure of pets to meet owners' expectations. It will take away the public's choice for a pet without any reduction in the numbers of pets relinquished to shelters.

Those who do not alter their cats now are unlikely to change after the initial media hype surrounding passage of a new law. Authorities lack the manpower, or the legal right, to search each and every home in a community looking for the small percentage of unaltered pets.

With enforcement of these laws nearly impossible, veterinarians are often conscripted into becoming government agents. When veterinarians are required to report unaltered pets who receive treatment, some pet owners will avoid veterinary care for their animals. This not only affects the proper care of the pet, it

