

Animal welfare Cat-feeding ordinance passed by supervisors

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SANTA CRUZ — What SPCA leaders hail as the nation's first ordinance making it illegal to feed stray cats was approved by the county Board of Supervisors Tuesday.

The ordinance was adopted as part of a hotly debated and sweeping package of laws aimed at cutting the number of dogs and cats put to death each year by the SPCA.

Under the ordinance, anyone who feeds stray cats for more than 30 days would be considered their owner. As such, they would have to register with the pound, feed the cats daily and spay or neuter them.

Stray cats are often sick and starving but still capable of breeding, said Jody Paterniti, SPCA director. Simply feeding them is not enough.

"It's uninformed and misguided kindness," she said. "... Are they really being kind to the cat? If you want to be a caretaker, you need to do more than feed and water."

Violators of the ordinance would face fines that start at \$100 and escalate to \$200 and then \$500 for subsequent violations.

Supervisor Fred Keeley argued for a less punitive approach to the problem of stray and feral cats.

"Some kindhearted soul has these cats around their house or farm. It's not their pet, it doesn't come inside," he said. He asked whether the ordinance would ultimately lead to more animal abuse or neglect.

People's reaction to the ordinance, he said, could be "I'm kindhearted but I have limited resources. ... You see the dilemma."

"It's making kindness a crime," said Paterniti, summing up Keeley's comments. But, she countered, "There isn't a good solution."

Along with registering and feeding the stray cats, caretakers would have to regularly and frequently trap cats more than eight weeks old.

The owner would be responsible for having the cats spayed or neutered, vaccinated for rabies and tested for two contagious cat diseases. Cats who have either disease would have to be killed. Trapped cats would be identified by having the tips of their ears cut off before being released. The more usual tag-and-collar identification is dangerous for wild cats, said SPCA workers.

But the part of the ordinance that affects every dog and cat owner in the county is the requirement that dogs or cats older than six months be spayed or neutered unless their owner buys a \$15 annual "unaltered animal certificate."

To get the certificate, the owner would also have to meet standards set by the ordinance, such as having a veterinarian examine the animal annually; properly house, care for, feed and exercise the animal; and confine dogs to their owner's property.

The SPCA has already asked local veterinary hospitals to donate their services to spay or neuter 10 stray cats per year.

Keeley successfully asked the board to raise the fee for unaltered animals to provide more money for

Cat law

Continued from Page A1
free spay and neuter certificates for feral cats.

Aptos supervisor Walt Symons asked how the SPCA will enforce the stray cat ordinance.

"Normally, simply by asking," said Lisa Juday, the captain of the county's animal control services. She granted there will always be some people who say "29 days" after the ordinance is passed.

In that case, she said, "We would come back next week. If we see the same animals, the same food bowls," then the officer will have a basis to enforce the ordinance. "If it's a stray, we'll take it," she said. "We'll trap it, if that's what they want."

Local dog breeders and veterinarians have opposed the ordinance as unfairly punishing those who are already responsible breeders.

Earlier this year, county officials tried to exempt "responsible breeders" from regulation. However, it proved impossible to define, said County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello, and the effort shifted to making the requirements for breeding

permits as easy as possible.

The supervisors' decision did little to mollify the opponents of the ordinance.

"Fundamentally we're still opposed," said breeder Lynn Schmitt of the Animal Issues Alliance, which had called for community-based low-cost spay-neuter programs.

The cost of spaying and neutering pets can range from \$15 for an advertised tomcat neutering special to \$150 for a large-breed female dog. The alliance had argued for an aggressive program that would subsidize the spaying and neutering of cats, which make up the vast majority of the animals killed each year by the SPCA.

At times, the debate about animals' reproductive habits Tuesday got downright clinical.

Board Chairman Gary Patton wanted to know why police dogs, search-and-rescue dogs and the like would be exempt from the requirement that all dogs and cats more than six months old be spayed or neutered.

"Does the sexual ability to reproduce affect their ability to perform their duties?" Patton asked.

"It's the desirability of the gene pool," said Mauriello.