

Position Statement
January 3, 1995

Against Mandatory Cat Licensing

Can licensing wipe out homelessness, raise the status of the underprivileged, eliminate the budget crisis, and make people more caring and responsible? Few would believe these claims, if they were being made about a program to license people. Yet, when it comes to cats, we are asked to believe all these claims are true: According to proponents, mandatory cat licensing will put an end to the problem of stray and abandoned cats, raise the status of felines, increase funding for budget-strapped animal control agencies, and make cat owners more responsible. Unfortunately, licensing cats, like licensing people, won't do any of these things.

The San Francisco SPCA has considered the various claims made for mandatory cat licensing legislation and has found little in the way of evidence—or even, in some cases, common sense—to support them. In our view, rather than helping cats or their caretakers, the primary effects of mandatory cat licensing legislation would be to:

- (1) put the lives and well-being of cats at risk and serve as a tool for round-up-and-kill campaigns;**
- (2) penalize responsible cat owners and force many compassionate caretakers to stop providing for homeless and abandoned cats;**
- (3) cost local governments and taxpayers money; and**
- (4) inappropriately expand the power and reach of government bureaucracies and enforcement agencies.**

Indeed, the most vocal proponents of cat licensing have been municipal animal control agencies and humane organizations that hold contracts to perform animal control services—the very agencies and organizations that stand to gain the most in terms of more staff, larger budgets, and expanded enforcement and community oversight powers. Since none of these broad new powers will help cats, their caretakers, or the local taxpayers (who will ultimately have to foot the bill), we cannot escape the conclusion that the call for cat licensing legislation has more to do with increasing bureaucratic powers, than with compassion, saving lives, and providing a helping hand to those who care.

Our analysis of each of the claims made for mandatory cat licensing is attached. For further information on The San Francisco SPCA and its programs to help cats and cat caretakers, please contact us at 2500 -16th Street, San Francisco, California 94103-6589, (415) 554-3000.

Cat Licensing: Analysis of Claims

Claim: Cat licensing will make cat owners more responsible.

Caring can't be mandated, and a licensing mandate will only end up punishing those who care. There are millions of compassionate people who provide abandoned cats with food, love, and shelter in their own homes. Others put aside their own needs in order to care for a beloved pet or make sure a shy and reclusive neighborhood cat has daily sustenance and medical attention. Still others work tirelessly to feed, foster and rehabilitate feral cats and kittens, all at their own personal expense. For every one of these caregivers, mandatory cat licensing will exact a heavy toll. These people will either have to pay the license fees—in essence, a "cat tax" on each of the pets they care for—or face citations, fines, penalties, and possible confiscation of the animals they love. These new burdens, inflicted on the very people who are doing the most to help cats in their communities, will force many to stop caring for these animals, or at least force them to care for fewer cats, with the net result being more cats left to fend for themselves and fewer people able to provide them with any kind of safety net at all.

In response to these concerns, some cat licensing proponents have said that enforcement won't be stressed, or will only be "complaint driven." In our view, passing laws that aren't enforced or are enforced sporadically is just as unfair and counterproductive: Few people are likely to comply with a cat licensing mandate that isn't enforced. (In Los Angeles, for instance, compliance rates of less than 1% were reported, in spite of a canvassing program.*) And people who "voluntarily" comply can probably be counted among the *most* responsible (and affluent) pet owners in the community. We see little equity or sense in enacting a law that only ends up penalizing through a licensing tax the very people whose behavior is already exemplary.

Needless to say, truly irresponsible cat owners won't be affected. If the law isn't enforced, they are free to ignore it. If it is enforced against them, they are likely to surrender or abandon their animals, which will only add to the number of cats killed.

* San Diego County Animal Control Advisory Committee, Subcommittee on Cat Licensing. Report to the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, November 22, 1993, p. 6.

Claim: Cat licensing will help raise the status of cats.

In our view, this claim is on a par with the suggestion that licensing poor people or the homeless will help raise their "status." Of course, cat licensing proponents aren't making a comparison to people, but to dogs: if cats are licensed like dogs, they will apparently enjoy the same "status" as dogs. Unfortunately, dog licensing didn't confer any beneficial "status" on canines: it was and is a tool for protecting livestock, enforcing rabies laws, and ridding the public streets of the perceived threat posed by unowned, free-roaming dogs. Indeed, since 1933 California dog licensing laws have explicitly authorized the impoundment of unlicensed dogs, and millions of dogs have been impounded and killed by animal control agencies throughout the state as a result of these mandatory licensing laws.

This is the precedent to which proponents of cat licensing appeal when they claim that licensing will raise the "status" of cats. We doubt, however, whether cats would choose such a status for themselves. They might well prefer to retain the unlicensed status they now share with humans. And the dogs may want to join them.

Claim: Cat licensing will result in more cats being redeemed at shelters.

Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that cat redemptions are just as likely, if not more likely, to decline once voluntary cat identification efforts are replaced with a coercive licensing mandate. In Los Angeles County, for instance, the number of stray cats redeemed by their owners was reported to be down 32% following implementation of mandatory licensing laws.*

Proponents have tended to ignore evidence like this, and instead point to the fact that dogs, who have been subject to licensing laws for years, enjoy higher redemption rates than cats. But dogs differ from cats in many ways, and there is no reason to think licensing is the factor that results in the higher redemption rate for dogs. Indeed, in San Francisco 63% of the stray dogs at the City's Animal Care and Control Department were redeemed by their owners in the 1993-4 fiscal year. Yet less than 4% of the dogs impounded during that time were licensed. It seems clear, then, that factors other than licensing are responsible for the high redemption rate for dogs.

* San Diego County Animal Control Advisory Committee, Subcommittee on Cat Licensing. Report to the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, November 22, 1993, p. 7.

Claim: Cat licensing will help decrease shelter euthanasias.

Since cat licensing will likely result in more cats being surrendered to shelters and abandoned in the community, since it will not appreciably affect redemptions, and since it may very well become a vehicle for round-up-and-kill campaigns, it is difficult for us to see how it would result in a decrease in shelter euthanasias.

Claim: Cat licensing will raise money to help fund animal control agencies.

Cat licensing will cost local governments and taxpayers money, not raise it, resulting in a net loss to animal control and/or other vital government services. Indeed, we doubt whether revenues raised would even cover basic administrative expenses. For example, each license fee collected--and most proposals we've seen set the fee between \$5 and \$10--will have to cover the costs of manufacturing, handling, storing and mailing the actual licenses (and/or implanting microchips), handling the checks and cash received, issuing receipts, recording and filing the necessary data on each cat and owner, updating the data as needed, responding to public questions and comments, mailing out renewal notices and reminders, preparing accounting statements and annual program reports, etc. This list doesn't include overhead or initial start-up expenses, like hiring and training staff to run the new program and developing new computer programs and databases.

And if the fees collected won't cover basic administrative expenses, they certainly won't cover the enormous costs of public awareness campaigns and enforcement. As noted above, "voluntary" compliance with cat licensing mandates is notoriously low. To raise compliance rates, the community will have to be made aware of the new mandate: door-to-door canvassing, city and countywide mailings, advertisements in local print media--all bear significant costs. And these campaigns will have to be repeated on a regular basis to maintain public awareness. Of course, these efforts alone won't ensure compliance, and they will have to be backed by meaningful enforcement. New enforcement staff will have to be hired, or existing staff taken away from other essential duties, in order to patrol the community for unlicensed cats, respond to complaints, issue citations, prepare reports, etc. *And all these costs will have to be paid by local taxpayers, either through higher taxes or through cuts in other vital government services.*

Claim: Dog owners contribute to animal control costs through license fees; it's time cat owners pay their fair share.

Just as license fees aren't likely to cover the real costs of a cat licensing program, we strongly doubt whether the fees now paid by dog owners cover much more than the basic costs of administering dog licensing programs. From a fiscal standpoint, therefore, local governments and taxpayers, not to mention dog owners, may well be better off if mandatory dog licensing were simply abolished. In any event, enacting another costly government program that won't pay for itself isn't the way to give dog owners the equity they seek.

No doubt there will be animal control agencies and contracting humane organizations who dispute our analysis and offer projections to show that cat licensing will make money for animal control services in their communities. We believe these agencies should be willing to stand behind these projections by having their taxpayer-financed budgets cut by the projected amount. Without this or a similar mechanism for accountability, we fear cat licensing will become yet another expensive government program that only works to inappropriately expand government bureaucracies at the expense of local taxpayers, responsible cat caretakers, and the animals themselves.

Claim: Regulating cat owners through licensing and other mandates is the only way to solve cat problems.

In our view, the way to teach people to be responsible pet owners and help the cats in a community is through voluntary, incentive-based measures that enable people to do the right thing. Government mandates that seek to blame and punish pet owners are likely to be costly and counterproductive for all the reasons we have outlined above. Moreover, it seems to us grossly unfair to penalize the community at large through coercive mandates, when it is the local shelters who are the primary source of animals and whose policies and practices have the greatest impact, for better or worse, on local animal welfare issues.

We realize, however, that in some cases local shelter policies may have failed and animal problems may be worsening in a community. In such cases, government intervention might be warranted, provided it is carefully focused to have the greatest impact. For instance, requiring shelters to alter animals before adoption and to devote a substantial proportion of their annual animal control and shelter budgets (e.g., 10-20%) to offering free spay/neuter services would do far more to help cats and reduce pet overpopulation than cat licensing and other punitive mandates.