



# AGAINST CAT-LICENCING

by **Richard Avanzino & Pam Rockwell**

(From ANIMAL PEOPLE, April 1995.)

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 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, and has found neither evidence nor common sense to support them. In our view, the primary effects of mandatory cat licensing would be to:

- \* **Put the lives and well-being of cats at risk, and rationalize round-up-and-kill campaigns;**
- \* **Penalize responsible cat owners, and force many compassionate caretakers to stop providing for homeless cats;**
- \* **Cost taxpayers money; and**
- \* **Inappropriately expand the power of government.**

Indeed the most vocal proponents of cat licensing have been animal control agencies and humane organizations that hold contracts to do animal control the very agencies and organizations that stand to gain the most in terms of more staff, larger budgets, and expanded enforcement power. Since none of this expanded power will help either cats, their caretakers, or taxpayers, we cannot escape the conclusion that the call for cat licensing has more to do with entrenching bureaucracy than with compassion, saving lives, and providing a helping hand to those who care.

**Claim: licensing will make cat owners more responsible.**

Caring can't be mandated, and a licensing mandate will only punish those who care. Millions of compassionate people 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 personal expense. Mandatory cat licensing will exact a heavy toll from every one of these caregivers. They will either have to pay the license fees in essence, a "cat tax" on each of the cats they care for or face citations, fines, penalties, and possible confiscation of the animals they love. These new burdens, imposed on the very people who are doing the most to help cats, 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 to help them.

Responding 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, despite a canvassing program. And people who voluntarily comply can probably be counted among the most responsible and affluent pet owners. We see neither equity nor sense in enacting a law that only penalizes through taxation 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.

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

In our view, this claim is on a par with suggesting 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 say, cats will 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 of other threats posed by unowned, free-roaming dogs. Indeed, since 1933 California dog licensing laws have explicitly authorized the impoundment and killing of millions of un-licensed dogs, just for being unlicensed.

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

**Claim: Cat licensing will result in more cat redemptions.**

Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that cat redemptions are as likely, if not more likely, to decline once voluntary cat identification is replaced with coerced licensing. In Los Angeles County, for instance, the number of stray cats redeemed by their owners was reportedly down 32% after implementation of mandatory licensing.

Proponents tend to ignore such evidence like this, instead pointing out that dogs, who have been subject to licensing 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, 63% of the stray dogs at the San Francisco Animal Care and Control Department shelter were redeemed by their owners during the 1993-1994 fiscal year, even though just 4% of the dogs impounded were licensed.

Clearly, factors other than licensing are responsible for the high dog redemption rate.

**Claim: Cat licensing will help decrease shelter euthanasia.**

Since cat licensing will likely result in more cats being abandoned and/or surrendered to shelters, since it will not appreciably affect redemptions, and since it may very well become an impetus to 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 for animal control.**

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, proposals to set a license fee at from \$5.00 to \$10.00 probably couldn't even cover basic administrative expenses. Dog licensing has been a net loser in many communities at these fee levels; indeed, it was a net loser for the American SPCA in New York City even at a higher fee structure. There is no reason to

believe cat licensing could be any more cost-efficient. High fee levels, meanwhile, discourage compliance and enforcement via door-to-door canvassing is extremely expensive in terms of the personnel time that must be assigned to the task.

**Claim: Dog owners help pay animal control costs; it's time cat owners paid their fair share.**

As noted above, the usually higher licensing fees now paid by dog owners often cover little more than the basic costs of administering the licensing programs, if that much. From a fiscal standpoint, therefore, local governments and taxpayers, not to mention dog owners, might 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 equity.

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 service in their communities. We believe these agencies should be willing to stand behind their projections by having their direct subsidies cut by the amount they expect cat licensing to raise. 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 bureaucracy at the expense of 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. 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 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, providing 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 neutering services would do far more to help cats and reduce pet overpopulation than cat licensing and other punitive mandates.

Pamela Rockwell is Ethical Studies Coordinator for the San Francisco SPCA; Richard Avanzino is president. This guest column is adapted from the official SFSPCA position paper on cat licensing.

Editor's note: The statistics in the above pertaining to Los Angeles are in dispute. For the statement of County of Los Angeles Animal Care and Control executive assistant Bob Ballenger and Richard Avanzino's response, see the letters section of the June 1995 edition of ANIMAL PEOPLE.

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