

# Does Cat Licensing Work?

By Beth Kalet

**Y**ou go to your town hall, fill out some paper work, pay a fee and voila — you have a license for your cat. No big deal, right? You figure you've made it easier for your cat to be found if it gets lost and you may be helping the thousands of cats killed in shelters each year. Who could argue against such noble causes? The idea of licensing and the issues of freedom versus responsibility and unwanted taxation have been around for a long time: They are as old as America itself.

All across the country, the topic of cat licensing elicits strong reactions. Opponents say it's just another unnecessary form of taxation. Proponents say it helps control rabies and the problem of feral cat overpopulation. Pet owners and breeders simply flout registration and licensing laws they consider a nuisance, says Joan Miller of Suisun City, Calif., legislative coordinator for the Cat Fanciers' Association, the largest registry of pedigreed cats.

"It's like the 55-mph speed limit. Everybody does 70," says George

Eigenhauser of San Diego, Calif., Southwest regional director for CFA.

Jack Kopf, a CFA registered breeder in Glen Rock, N.J., says he has little problem with the law in his town. The limit is six adult cats per household. "Six cats underfoot are enough for me," he says.

Still, such laws are a rallying cry for many.

As a means of keeping feral cats under control, they are the wrong tack to take, says Becky Robinson, national director of Alley Cat Allies, a national



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Studies by the Cat Fanciers' Association show licensing does not reduce euthanasia rates for cats brought to shelters.

feral cat coalition based in Washington, D.C., that promotes trap-neuter-return efforts. If the aim is to promote responsible pet ownership and enforce ID for pets, the laws are pointless, Miller says. Pet owners prove their responsibility by caring for and neutering their own cats, she says. "Most of us [CFA and its advocates] have no problem with the idea of identification, but we don't really consider identification and licensing synonymous," Miller says.

Can cat licensing really accomplish goals of responsible pet ownership?

"That's the \$64,000 question," Eigenhauser says. Certainly many cat-licensing opponents see it as nothing more than a way to produce revenue. "The stated purpose of ID tags is so [owned pets] can be returned to their owner, but it just becomes another way to tax," Eigenhauser adds.

Licensing typically requires owners to register their cats. They pay a fee to the local government based on whether the cat is spayed or neutered. Some communities give discounts for multi-cat households; some give senior citizen discounts. They may issue a paper

license and metal tag, asking pet owners to put the tags on their cats. The truth is that few communities do anything to enforce tag-wearing. As a rule towns do not patrol for unlicensed cats, but when animal control officers do pick up a cat, a fine will likely be levied

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— Don Jordan

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if an owner is found. Costs can run in the neighborhood of \$20.

The Humane Society of the United States, based in Washington, D.C., along with a half dozen other respected organizations, supports licensing. Licensing promotes spaying and neutering, protects against rabies, helps return lost cats to their owners and protects cats found outside from disease, HSUS says.

Concerns about sterilization and rabies inoculations often lead commu-

nities to develop cat licensing laws. In the city of Columbia, Mo., licensing has been required for at least 15 years, says animal control officer Jean Easley.

"It started out just to make sure people were getting rabies shots for their cats. It's just a separate tag they purchase from their veterinarian when they get their shots. It's renewable at that time," she says. And that's where the regulation stays. "We have no law against cats running loose. We don't pick them up."

As a means of assuring regular veterinary care, Columbia's policy is in keeping with the spirit of HSUS policy and is generally considered reasonable. It is also difficult to argue against identification for all pets as a valuable safeguard. CFA supports voluntary identification, Eigenhauser says. The North Shore Animal League in Port Washington, N.Y., believes all animals should be licensed for identification purposes, says spokeswoman Marilyn DiToro. She doesn't believe cat licensing laws, though, have proved enforceable.

In Seattle, Wash., cat licensing has

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been required more than a dozen years. Fees generate \$250,000-\$300,000 yearly, providing 12-15 percent of his \$2 million budget, says Don Jordan, Seattle's manager of animal control. "The most important issue obviously is identifying cats," Jordan says. He cites a sobering fact: Of the 6,000 animals coming into his shelter yearly, they return only about 1,500 to their owners.

Licensing is "a vital tool for rabies control in rabies-epizootic areas," the HSUS says. A well-written cat-licensing ordinance will link licenses to rabies vaccinations, thereby giving backbone to a community's push for mandatory rabies vaccinations, says HSUS issues specialist Nancy Peterson. When the license requires a vaccine, the community can ensure its safety.

The New Jersey borough of Glen Rock, which was among Northeast communities experiencing a rabies spike several years ago, also supports this premise. "The impetus [for cat licensing] is rabies control," says Paula Fleming, who directs cat and dog licensing for the borough administrator's office. Glen Rock's ordinance permits a small fine to be levied against a

cat owner who has not licensed his adult cats. Instances of fining owners occur rarely if ever, she says.

Despite opposition, many communities already require owners to license cats. Typically, registering a neutered cat costs up to \$10; a non-neutered cat

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**"We believe that the attempt to put laws on the books to solve the overpopulation problem, the problem of lost and free-roaming cats, is misguided. It's tunnel vision thinking."**

— Becky Robinson,  
Alley Cat Allies

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costs more. Recently enacted legislation in Howard County, Md., for example, charges a \$24 license fee for an unsterilized cat or dog. To back up its policy,

the county's animal control administrator, Brenda Purvis, said in announcing the policy, "Cat licensing raises the chances that neighbors and other citizens will take cats back to owners, rather than calling impoundment authorities."

While licensing violations usually call for fines, many communities do not enforce them. In Austin, Texas, cat licensing is mandatory, yet cats are not required to wear tags. "It really is in essence a pet tax," says Karen Medicus, executive director of the Humane Society SPCA of Austin and Travis County. "I think the philosophy from the government is that it's a kind of user's tax to fund the animal control department." And it's a busy department, running a no-kill re-homing center and an active feral cat colony program.

A large feral cat colony led the college-town of New Paltz, N.Y., to enact cat regulations. "It's a sad situation really," New Paltz Mayor Thomas Nyquist says. With a population of only 5,400, and one in six houses used for student housing during the school year, New Paltz has its share of lost and abandoned cats come mid-May, Nyquist

Board of Supervisors rejected cat licensing in 1994.

In San Francisco, the SF/SPCA, "came to similar conclusions ... and has become the largest city in the U.S. to have a no-kill policy," Eigenhauser says.

An important consideration is whether licensing pushes owners to spay or neuter pets, Miller says. As many as six studies show 86-87 percent of all owned cats are already neutered and spayed, she says. "So it really boils down to a very small percentage of owned cats not [being] neutered and spayed." As a means of limiting unwanted litters, though, statistics may not tell the whole story. Other studies show "that a number of cats had a litter before being spayed," Miller says.

Licensing could have the biggest implications on feral cat colonies, because no one "owns" these cats although some people take responsibility for them. Cat licensing programs are generally modeled after those for dogs, but that is not appropriate, Eigenhauser says. "Dogs are either owned or not owned," he says. Should caretakers of feral cats be taxed for keeping them alive? Should they be encouraged to help round cats up for sterilization? Or will they give up because they can't afford the licenses?

In handling the problem of feral cats or any cat not intended to breed, Miller says early altering is the solution. This is becoming more acceptable.

While licensing laws may limit the number of cats a breeder can keep at one time, CFA's Miller says most breeders do not regard themselves as business people, rather as hobbyists. Therefore, they often ignore the taxation and regulation. "I don't know of many breeders who are licensing their cats," she says.

Many people tacitly agree some laws are made to be broken, too much regulation strangles a free society and one of our nation's biggest problems is government getting involved where it doesn't belong. Does cat licensing constitute too much government, as its opponents claim? Or is it really a benign method of ensuring safety for all cats, as its advocates believe? Perhaps a middle ground exists, which is the tack taken by ACA.

You can get involved by contacting your county or city clerk's office to learn about local policy. If no policy exists or one is on the table, check with local shelters to find out their position. Attend public meetings to hear discussions and voice an opinion. Don't let your town confuse its need to manage stray pets in the community with the need to manage the rights of pet owners. Show you care for your pet in the most responsible way by providing it with ID, by spaying or neutering and by helping other animals in your community to benefit from the same care. 🐾

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