

# Vaccination bill gets mixed response

*Vet says dozens of cases in Missouri each year*

By Bob Watson

Thursday, January 12, 2012

*Jefferson City News Tribune*

Most Missouri city dwellers already have to get their dogs and cats vaccinated for rabies. But state Sen. Dan Brown, R-Rolla, wants lawmakers to make those vaccinations a statewide requirement.

"Most municipalities and some counties actually have ordinances that regulate this, (and) this does not supersede those requirements," Brown, who also is a veterinarian, told colleagues on the Senate's Agriculture, Food Production and Outdoor Resources Committee, Tuesday afternoon.

"In outstate Missouri, in some of our smaller counties, there is no guidance and no rules or regulations that law enforcement and veterinarians practicing in those counties really have to go by," Brown said.

Violations of the law — if it clears the Legislature and governor — would be a Class C misdemeanor, and could result in a sentence of not more than 15 days in jail.

"It kind of brings Missouri into the 20th century, even though this is the 21st century," Brown said. "We're way behind on what our statutes state with regard to rabies."

The disease affects mammals' nervous systems and brains and, unless treated, leads to death.

Sedalia veterinarian Clark Fobian told the Senate panel's members that his move from the city to rural Pettis County three years ago drove "home to me the disparity between being in the city limits, where they have an ordinance requiring rabies immunizations, and then moving out of the city limits ... where control of dogs is not harshly enforced unless they're causing a nuisance."

Fobian, who represents Missouri veterinarians on the American Veterinary Medical Board, told lawmakers Missouri has between 40 and 73 "bona fide cases of rabies in wildlife or domestic animals each year" — and that requiring owners to vaccinate their dogs and cats would serve as a barrier to humans getting infected by wild animals, where rabies constantly run throughout the population.

Neither dogs nor cats would ignore an animal "wounded" by rabies, likely attacking it and becoming a potential carrier if not vaccinated against the disease, Fobian said.

An infected pet raises the danger of humans contracting the disease.

Veterinarian Chuck Massengale, a retired state Agriculture department epidemiologist, told senators a Highway Patrol trooper bitten by a rural family's dog several years ago had to go to court to force the family to tie the animal up so it could be monitored, to make sure it wasn't infected.

The law would give officers and veterinarians a "legal, clear definition in outstate Missouri that we can do a follow-up examination on that animal," Brown said.

The only sure way to determine if an animal has rabies is to euthanize it and do an autopsy of the brain.

Last year, there were 1,868 Missouri cases tested for rabies, with only 29 positive confirmations, Brown said.

State Sen. Bill Stouffer, R-Napton, wondered if the proposed solution wasn't "a big move for

29 cases.”

Karen Strange, president of the Missouri Federation of Animal Owners, said her group shares “the concerns about the public health and that of animals,” but they think the law could be used to require the vaccination of stray animals who aren’t owned by anyone.

And Barb York, president of the Missouri Pet Breeders Association, told lawmakers the bill may be overkill, since all the confirmed rabies cases occurred among “bats and skunks ... not dogs and cats.”

She added: “I don’t have a problem with cities and counties making it mandatory for vaccinations but, when it becomes mandatory for the state, it becomes a real issue, a monetary issue.

“If the people are going to do it wrong, they will do it wrong regardless of the law.”

Committee members took no action Wednesday on the proposal.