

31<sup>st</sup> May 2015

Honorable Sara Gesler, Chair  
Senate Committee on Human Services & Early Childhood

RE: HB 3494-A OPPOSE UNLESS AMENDED  
Meeting Date June 2

Chair Gesler, and members of the committee,

I am writing to you as a concerned citizen and animal lover who lives north of your borders, in western Washington state. I know that as such my voice here carries less weight, but I hope that you will nevertheless give time and consideration to what I have to say.

I understand that Oregon HB 3494 started out with the laudable goal of prohibiting landlords from requiring declawing or devocalization of pets as a condition of rental. Somewhere along the way, and with the very best of intentions it has become what is purported to be an anti-declaw, anti-devocalisation bill. However, as written, it has loopholes so large as to render the bill essentially unenforceable whilst at the same time effectively legitimizing these cruel practices by codifying them into law. I firmly believe that if passed this will not only set back (or destroy) chances of getting a meaningful anti-declaw and/or anti-devocalisation bill onto the books in Oregon, but that it would also catastrophically end up being used as model legislation in other jurisdictions. I therefore urge you not to pass HB 3494-A in its current form, but to pass it with the A5 Amendments.

I will focus the rest of my commentary on declawing, since this is the issue with which I am far more familiar, and since the impression I gathered, whilst watching testimony this previous Tuesday was that there is far less objection on the part of the veterinary profession to an outright ban upon devocalization.

In fact, on Tuesday afternoon we heard testimony that, in my opinion, calls into serious question the notion that declawing is currently, and ever would be reserved by all veterinarians as a true practice of last resort. And indeed, despite the current AVMA policy stating that this should represent the limit of its use, we absolutely do still see veterinarians offering coupons for cut-price declawing, offering it as an up-sell with spay/neuter, or even presenting it to customers as a routine aspect of kitten care – for kittens who have had no opportunity to develop problem habits, much less have them corrected by behavioural means. (I've encountered all of these approaches by vets within just the past few months.) It has been written that fully one third of southern California veterinarians will willingly declaw without being given any reason at all by the customer requesting it, whilst almost all are willing to do it to protect furniture. (Declaw and SCVMA update. Pulse. November, 2009, p. 4) Should a humane society tolerate the permanent mutilation of a defenseless animal just to protect the divan?

When an experienced veterinarian testifies that he has declawed all of his cats because he cannot manage to stop them from scratching his “beloved antiques” we can see that the current, laissez-faire, supposed “last resort” positioning of declaw amputation is failing our cats abysmally.

When we hear an experienced veterinarian make the excuse for this that he is not a Board Certified Behaviorist, we should be extremely alarmed – I am not a Board Certified Behaviorist and yet none of my cats has needed to have their toes amputated in order to prevent them from scratching the wrong inanimate objects – they have all easily been taught to use appropriate scratching posts. And to see them using those posts - stretching, scratching, and scent-marking them using their paws, with obvious pleasure – is something that makes me happy. As someone who loves their cats, seeing them delighting in their inherent “cat-ness” is deeply satisfying.

We have heard testimony – and this from someone whose very reason to testify was to object to any ban upon declawing - that admits that some veterinarians are carrying out this procedure so poorly that surgery is needed to relieve the very serious and ceaseless pain of cats who have been left with bone fragments in their paws. Nor are long-term complications such as bone fragments, regrowth (sometimes piercing through the pads), or abscesses, due to declaw surgery rare occurrences: a study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association found that about 20% of declawed cats suffered long-term complications from the surgery. (Jankowski et al. JAVMA, August 1, 1998) HB 3494-A, as written, will do *absolutely nothing* to prevent any of this needless suffering.

And yet, even if declawing is done as well as is possible, and even if the best and most stringent pain protocols are meticulously employed, this still does not prevent the development of problems in the ensuing years as a direct result of the modification of the cat’s gait – modification that is the inevitable result of the amputation of the last bones of the toes of a digitigrade creature. Detrimental changes to the cat’s anatomy as a result of this are clearly visible in X-rays. Cats are notoriously stoic creatures, tragically adept at hiding their pain so well that it is often not recognized even by their veterinarians, much less by their owners. But this does not mean that they are not feeling that pain every moment of every day.

I volunteer with a cat rescue here in western Washington and I have seen cats suffering from the after-effects of this amputation. Declawed cats absolutely are often subject to unremitting physical pain. And it is impossible to doubt that many of them are also incredibly emotionally fragile, exhibiting undesirable behaviours such as litter box avoidance or biting at the least stress, even when obvious physical causes such as remaining bone fragments or abscesses are ruled out. Even if we accept the premise that not all declawed cats suffer this way, a civilized society should not tolerate and explicitly legitimize in law a procedure that can leave even some (and, as it turns out, it is many) animals suffering in this way, when that suffering is entirely unnecessary.

The argument is often made that declawing is necessary to keep cats in their homes. Yet we have seen in other countries – those where declawing has never been the norm - that this is simply not true. And we have seen it too in those California jurisdictions where declawing is no longer permitted, and yet shelter surrender rates for undesirable scratching behaviours have not increased. Conversely, we also see across north America, on a daily basis, that declawed cats *are* being surrendered, abandoned, or brought to vets for convenience euthanasia. According to the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy’s Shelter Survey, destruction of household objects does not even rank in the top 10 reasons for surrender to shelters, whereas house soiling – a very common behavioural issue in declawed cats - was the number one behavioral reason cited; the number two reason cited was biting, another problem more common to declawed cats than

non-declawed. In the October 2001 issue of JAVMA, Patronek et al reported that “declawed cats [are] at an *increased* risk of relinquishment.” (Emphasis mine.) And, of course, house soiling and biting are problems that make those cats all the harder to re-home.

We have heard testimony that attempts to assert that animal behaviourists are too few and far between for people to be able to seek out such help. And yet the same witness speculated that if people were unable to have their cat declawed in Oregon, then they would travel elsewhere to do so. I view this testimony to be entirely inconsistent. And whilst board certified animal behaviourists might be uncommon, that ignores the wealth of other resources open to people. For example, there are other qualified animal behaviourists (CCBC - Certified Cat Behavior Consultants, AABP - Association of Animal Behavior Professionals, IAABC – International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants, etc.) and also, many shelters and rescues offer handouts and/or online resources to prevent or address behavioural issues; some even offer behaviour helplines.

I will touch only briefly upon the old canard we so often hear of protecting frail or immuno-compromised cat owners. As Dr. Cochrane testified, declawing cats to protect the health of immuno-compromised individuals is not recommended by the Center for Disease Control, by the US Public Health Service, nor by the National Institutes of Health. And, of course, immuno-compromised and otherwise frail individuals in the many countries where declawing has been outlawed as animal cruelty still manage to live safely with their cats, by simply employing common sense. I will close on this particular topic with the personal observation that I’ve never seen a cat scratch that has caused significant problems, but bites can often be incredibly nasty; and, as noted earlier, declawed cats are far quicker, on average, to bite.

So, in closing, I will reiterate my initial plea to you. Please do *not* pass HB 3494-A unless all non-therapeutic exceptions are removed. To do so would be to do a disservice to the cats of Oregon, and to anyone who truly cares for them. Not only that, but to do so would be to the detriment of cats across the entire country, as this highly flawed bill will almost inevitably be used as the model for legislation elsewhere. Please take a stand, instead, to make Oregon a humane leader in this country, by passing the bill with the A5 Amendment, the latter subjected also to the change of explicitly stating these procedures should be used only to address “physical ailments”.

Sincerely,

Tracey M. Frankcom