

BLACK HILLS PIONEER

BREAKING NEWS

Pet spaying and neutering the best policy

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Published:
Monday, October 27, 2008 12:00 PM CDT



Volunteer coalition director Donna Watson helps Laurie Banton of Spearfish get Fido, who has had two litters in the last four months, ready to be spayed. **Pioneer photo by Jaci Conrad-Pearson.**

NORTHERN HILLS - After helping her newfound family friend Fido foster two litters of kittens in approximately four months, Laurie Banton of Spearfish recently dropped off the former stray at Spearfish Animal Hospital to take advantage of the South Dakota West River Spay/Neuter Coalition's clinic.

"She's already had two litters and we just don't want any more running around," said Banton, who described the chance meeting she and her husband had with their fateful new friend. "She really adopted us. We're building a house and she just started coming around while we were working. We really didn't want a cat, but I told my husband she could be a guard cat and I jokingly named her Fido. I said, 'guard cat,' and she laid down in the driveway. The next day she had kittens," explained Banton.

Fido never left and Banton is still caring for what's left of the two litters the beautiful black cat had over the summer.

But most stray felines are not nearly so lucky. And just as important, neither are their young. This is why the work of the S.D. West River Spay-Neuter Coalition is so imperative for animal control and, in turn, animal health and welfare in the area.

"With the assistance of veterinarians in the northern Black Hills and Rapid City, who graciously offer a reduced cost for the alteration procedure, we assisted qualified area pet owners with altering over 800 cats and 200 dogs during our first two years of operation. Thus we have prevented the births and suffering of thousands of pets," said Donna Watson, a volunteer program administrator.

On this particular day, Dr. Elsom and staff are scheduled to perform eight spays and 10 neuters. This constitutes a "full clinic," which is pretty much the case every two months. "He's been just great to do this for us," said Watson. "We have a hard time finding vets who will do this and he has been so gracious. He's really just giving us his time and we appreciate his work so much," she added.

Do the math. If each of the eight spay candidates were to have a litter, say, of five kittens, that's easily 40 new kittens with a very slim chance of every single one finding homes.

And Elsom said, this is a big problem.

"One of the major issues with animal control is overpopulation with cats. From a humanistic point of view, from a general health point of view, it's important to society that we take care of our animals. It defines us as people, the way we care for our animals," he said.

Elsom is one of a handful of veterinarians committed to the cat population control cause, more or less donating his time, as the low-cost spays are \$35 and low-cost neuters are \$25, a significant savings to pet owners and hopefully an incentive to have the procedures performed.

"We feel it's important to take care of the cat population problem," said Spearfish Animal Hospital Manager Julie Walker, who has pretty much seen it all in her nine years with Elsom. "We see cats come in from the humane society, kittens dropped off with no homes. We're just trying to help control overpopulation. We're just here to help people who can't afford it."

Prompted by the disturbing number of euthanized cats at the Humane Society of the Black Hills in Rapid City and an all-around high intake rate at virtually all area shelters, the South Dakota West River Spay-Neuter Coalition was formally organized in March 2006 and moved into action with its first spay-neuter clinic in June of 2006. The goals of the organization arose from the lack of ongoing low-cost spay-neuter clinics in the area.

With the continued dedication of the S.D. West River Spay-Neuter Coalition and increased public awareness of the very easy solution to an often overlooked problem, the shocking kill rate for cats at the Humane Society of the Black Hills in Rapid City, the only euthanasia site in the area, may start to come down. "The rate they kill cats at is shocking," said Watson. "Last year, they had something like 3,100 come in and of those, 2100 were killed."

Four and possibly five veterinarians in Rapid City and the Northern Hills help the all-volunteer coalition with its cause. They are always in need of more veterinarians and are always looking for volunteers to help with the clinics.

For more information, visit www.spayneutercoalition.com.

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