

Microchip implants of pets in Spain aid in identifying strays

MADRID (AP) Dogs and cats in Spain's largest cities must undergo microchip implants to make it easier for authorities to reunite lost pets with their owners and track down those who would rather abandon Lassie or Sheba than pay a sitter.

Four of Spain's 17 regions require dog and cat owners to identify their pets with the chips or tattoos under what are apparently the only such laws in Western Europe.

Each chip carries a code that matches a file in a regional computer. Eventually,

those computers will be linked, which is seen as a necessity, since a dog with serious wanderlust can rove as far as 160 km in a short time.

"The whole object is not only to make it nationwide, but also Europe-wide, and then universal," said Dr. William Hutchinson, a Scottish veterinarian working in Madrid.

The original purpose of the Madrid law — like statutes covering such cities as Barcelona, San Sebastian, Bilbao and Pamplona — was to monitor rabies vaccination rates and keep tabs on the pet population.

But the benefits for pets and

their owners are more real than computerized public health statistics.

The Madrid law went into effect six months ago, and 50,000 cats and dogs have already been "chipped," a relatively painless process — according to humans — in which the flea-sized capsule is injected into the animal's neck for about \$40.

Officials expect 100,000 chips will be implanted by year's end. A vast majority of owners choose chips over tattoos, which cost more and require that the animal be anesthetized.

If a pooch goes wandering

or is let loose by vacation-bound owners, a vet, dog catcher or police officer can read its chip with an electronic scanner much the same way a supermarket cashier rings up a bag of dog food.

Take Blackie, a Belgian shepherd who indulges in four-day strolls when the spirit moves him.

Last month, a kennel employee found Blackie 20 km from his suburban home. After a quick scan, Blackie was soon back with his family.

Hutchinson said the chips do not infect or otherwise irritate the animals, and will outlast even the most durable

dog or cat.

Ranchers use them to identify livestock in many nations, and European zoo keepers implant them in some animals.

The system is used on pets on a voluntary basis in Norway, Portugal, Great Britain, Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands.

In the United States, a few community groups, shelters and vets have started small voluntary programs.

Organizers of this year's Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race implanted chips in the hundreds of dogs that participated in a trek across Alaska.

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