



The Bakersfield Californian

Debate heats up over
controlling pet breeding

Searching for solutions

Debate over how to cut overbreeding is heated

BY JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer



This poodle was among the animals living in poor conditions at a home in Taft.



Animal carriers are stacked at the home in Taft that was targeted by Kern County Animal Control.

Thousands of unwanted animals are born in Kern County each year.

It's a problem that sent more than 16,000 dogs and cats to their deaths at the hands of county officials in the past year.

This county doesn't have a way to stop it from happening next year.

And the search for a solution has sparked a significant debate over private rights and government regulation.

County officials say that even with new rules, they don't have the manpower to track down every violator.

A worst case

Kern County Animal Control officials thought "puppy mill" when they visited Harry Thomas Pennock's home on Pierce Street in Taft in early March.

Six filthy, emaciated male poodles were penned in a small alley behind his house. Inside were four female poodles living amid feces and pools of drying urine. Authorities believe Pennock bred the animals for profit.

He pleaded no contest to animal cruelty and will never be allowed to own a dog again, said Kern County Animal Control chief Denise Haynes.

Regulation debate

But catching one unscrupulous breeder doesn't fix Kern's chronic animal overpopulation problem.

Most agree reducing the number of births is the only way to avoid killing animals. But the debate over how to reduce overbreeding is heated.

The most aggressive regulation, a mandatory spay and neuter ordinance, was set aside by government and animal activists as unachievable.

So earlier this year county officials proposed rules that would have required owners to get permits to keep more than six animals. An additional permit would be required

for anyone who raised and offered more than one litter of animals for sale in any 12 months.

Even those rules earned the ire of local breeders. They say the proposed rules are privacy invasions and punish responsible, animal-loving breeders for the actions of irresponsible owners.

County officials relented and proposed less-restrictive rules.

Haynes said she believes government should stay out of people's backyards. But that philosophy clashes with the daily reality of the county's animal shelter on South Mt. Vernon Avenue.

"I'm so torn. You don't want to regulate people's personal lives," she said.

But, "what I see every single day has educated me to the fact that there are some people -- a lot of people -- who won't do anything unless they are regulated."

Making 'beautiful little babies'

Haynes tells a story of a woman and her daughter who opposed the new rules at a Mojave meeting.

"They had a little mixed-breed and they just loved the idea of making beautiful little babies with their mixed breed," Haynes said.

But when three puppies were born, the women found homes for only two.

The women didn't know what they were going to do with the unwanted puppy, Haynes said.

"This is why we need rules on the book," she said.

Vera Edwards said she became an activist because she saw animals' pain and suffering at the county shelter.

"You have your backyard breeders that just don't care. You have irresponsible people who let their unaltered animals roam," she said. "The status quo isn't working. We've given people the freedom of choice, and look where it's gotten us."

Part of the family

Stephanie Rehkopf's registered Chinese Pug just delivered her first litter of seven puppies.

The dog is a family pet, and family is why Rehkopf bred her.

"My mother ... always told me that it was good for a dog to have at least one litter," Rehkopf said.

She said she let her dog carry a litter so her children, and the dog, could experience the process of giving life.

Rehkopf is selling the puppies for several hundred dollars each. But even that is about family, she said.

"We're using the money to go to Disneyland," she said.

Rehkopf fully supports stopping people who let their animals run loose and breed freely.

But purebred animals are in high demand, she said, and don't end up in animal shelters.

Animal breeders say that even if the county regulated breeding, the truly irresponsible breeders would simply ignore those regulations just as they ignore licensing laws.

Haynes said one of her big frustrations is not having enforcement staff to attack licensing violations.

"We want to be able to effectively enforce the laws that are on the books. To do that we need more staffing," she said.

Kern has 16 enforcement officers, up from 12 a few years ago.

But more are needed, she said.

"That 16 gets us to a level that would have been acceptable five years ago," Haynes said.

Her boss, Resource Management Agency Director David Price III, said new kennels and physical care resources are also needed.

Enforcement, coupled with education, can eventually change how people treat animals, Haynes said.

But in the short term, Price said, hiring more officers means more animals will be brought to the shelter. And county shelters are near capacity.

"We have to be careful about increasing the intake numbers because we have to properly care for the animals," Price said.

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