

September 29, 2009

Crackdown on Iowa puppy mills will be bipartisan effort

JENNIFER JACOBS • jejacobs@dmreg.com

Photos of dogs with matted fur, fleas, blackened teeth or crippled legs after being confined for lengthy periods in breeders' cages prompted the same feelings of outrage in state lawmakers of both parties Tuesday.

And after some heated exchanges, both Democratic and Republican lawmakers eventually agreed on how to crack down on so-called puppy mills.

A 10-member study committee voted unanimously to recommend the Iowa Legislature authorize state inspectors to inspect federally-licensed breeders when they get complaints.

To pay for the state's higher inspection costs, lawmakers should increase registration fees for breeders, which has been \$20 for 22 years, the committee said.

Making veterinarians "mandatory reporters" of animal abuse and neglect is another idea the Legislature should consider, committee members decided.

And state officials should investigate whether Iowa should be capturing more sales taxes from dog sales.

Some version of suggestions, and several others, will likely end up in a bill discussed by state lawmakers when the session begins in January, said Rep. Jim Lykam, D-Davenport, co-chairman of the study committee.

Eyewitness accounts show that some kennel owners in Iowa keep puppies in cages with rusty or jagged edges, cages stored in dark rooms, or overcrowded and unsanitary cages, the activists said. Activists have found dogs with malnourishment, severely matted hair, overgrown toenails, and, in one case, legs crippled from being caged for so long.

"This is a humanitarian issue we need to address," Mary LaHay of Des Moines, an activist with Iowa Voters for Companion Animals.

A dog breeder from Amana, Joe Gerst said the activists showed them "very skewed" data and video images.

"They represent a very small portion of our industry," said Gerst, a member of the Iowa Pet Breeders Association. "They don't represent it all, by any means."

Lawmakers deadlocked last session over proposed legislation on dog breeders and dealers. To keep lawmakers from debating deeper into the night on the last days of the session, lawmakers agreed to a special committee meeting to study the problem further.

The activists believe federal inspectors with the U.S. Department of Agriculture have too few inspectors in Iowa, and haven't done enough to make sure breeders here are giving proper care to dogs and cats.

About 72,000 dogs were sold in Iowa in 2007, the most recent year complete data was available. The average price per puppy was \$229. Iowa breeder revenue totaled \$16.4 million, LaHay said.

"We can afford to raise license fees," LaHay said.

Iowa has the third highest number of licensed breeders in the country, behind only Missouri and Oklahoma, she said.

Iowa's 403 licensed breeders make up about 10 percent of the nation's 4,237 breeders, LaHay said.

This year, 32 states considered bills dealing with puppy mills, according to the Humane Society of the United States. Nine states approved new laws.

One of the highest concentrations of breeders in Iowa is in Sioux County, and in several counties in southeast Iowa.

State Rep. Dwayne Alons, R-Hull, argued today that breeders in his area are struggling already and they don't need the hassle of more inspections.

"They're really struggling to make ends meet," Alons said.

State Sen. Pam Jochum, D-Dubuque, said she tried to visit a breeder site in her district Monday.

"I wanted to get a better understanding, but I was denied access," Jochum said.

The activists played for lawmakers a video taken with a hidden camera in 2006 that showed dogs in kennels with accumulated fecal matter and dirty water dishes at several Iowa breeders. In some cases, dogs were kept in dark rooms or caged wire kennels that were too small or with broken wires.

The video claims that several kennels shown in the video had violations of federal laws for the cleaning of primary enclosures, lighting, and animal health.

Gerst said his group doesn't condone bad practices in the breeding industry.

"What's a puppy mill? To us it's a filthy dirty substandard facility," he said. "No where have we ever defended, I'm going to use the word stupidity. And that's what you saw."

Gerst said that the dog breeding gave him the freedom to home school his children and care for foster children.

Gerst asked state lawmakers to use "sound reasoning."

"We want to do something about bad actors as well," he said. "They're a blight on our industry."

But any legislation should all licensed and regulated facilities and should be "protective of the good breeder," Gerst said.