

PET UNDERPOPULATION: THE PET SHORTAGE IN THE U.S. *By Loretta Baughan*

I recently had the opportunity to be a guest on a talk radio program discussing recent pet legislation efforts in Wisconsin spearheaded by a small group of animal rights extremists. Some callers to the program realized the threat to pet owners and breeders that such legislation poses and expressed their concern. Many callers, however, were frantic about the 'pet population' problem and thought laws were needed to stop breeders. Listen up! The notion that there is a 'pet overpopulation' problem is nothing more than a figment of the imagination of the anti-pet, anti-pet owner, and anti-pet breeder animal rights fanatics. Yes, you read correctly. There is definitely NOT an overpopulation of dogs or cats, at least not in the United States. There may have been a problem 25-30 years ago, but due to heavy promotion of spay and neuter, it is estimated that over 75% of dogs and more than 87% of cats have been surgically sterilized. The pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction that now we are actually facing a shortage of pets...a pet under-population. Many in the animal rights crowd know this dirty little secret, but are unwilling to be honest about it since they would lose credibility-not to mention a very effective 'tool' to leverage the public for donations, influence politicians to pass unnecessary legislation and the media to propagate their lies. Animal rights extremists have advanced their agenda by erroneously placing the blame for 'pet overpopulation' on pet breeders. They have been successful at using this falsehood to convince pet owners that the 'responsible' thing to do is to subject their pets to surgical sterilization in order to combat 'pet overpopulation'. Sadly, they have even hoodwinked many purebred breeders into thinking they must pressure their buyers to spay or neuter their puppies and kittens, to the detriment of many purebred gene pools. As a result, with fewer individual dogs being used in breeding programs, health problems are increasing as diversity is decreasing.

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers (APPMA) 2007-2008 National Pet Owners Survey, 63% of U.S. households owns pets-up from 56% in 1988, which was the first year this study was conducted. With national population figures having increased from approx. 244,500,000 people in 1988 to 303,200,000 at the end of 2007, the number of pet homes is ever increasing and at a greater rate than the human population. This is a trend that shows no sign of slowing down. The latest APPMA figures show that Americans own 74.8 million dogs a whopping 88.3 million cats. We are a nation that loves pets and consider them part of the family. We open our hearts, our homes and our wallets to care for our pets. We spend a lot of money on our pets. In less than 20 years, this figure has nearly doubled from \$23 billion in 1988 to a projected \$40.8 billion last year. A shortage of homes for pets is not the problem. So, then, why are there so many dogs and cats in animal shelters? In a nutshell, the answer to that question is poor management of shelters coupled with a resistance to adopt methods that work. Many of the smaller shelters are operated by people who love animals and desperately want to help, but are lacking in animal husbandry experience and management skills. One shelter manager I spoke with blamed 'breeders' for the dogs coming through their doors, then in an emotional rant, claimed that breeders are forcing their females to have three or four litters a year-keeping them pregnant all of the time. I interrupted her and said that was

physically impossible since dogs typically only come into season twice a year. She then admitted she didn't know that and said, "Well, I'm not a breeder, myself." The woman's heart is in the right place, but without an understanding gained from hands on experience raising dogs or cats, how can we expect our shelters to succeed? Like it or not, an animal shelter is a business-and it has to be operated as such. Most of the dogs entering shelters are surrendered by their owners due to behavior issues. Often, it boils down to a simple lack of training. Animal shelters that offer obedience classes can help curb the influx of this type of dog into their shelter and be able to help the dog, the owner and the community. Other dogs brought to shelters because they are sick or old and their owners cannot afford to pay-or do not want to pay- for vet care or euthanasia. In some shelters, cats may outnumber dogs by about a 2-1 ratio. Many of these cats are feral and are owned by no one. Most are classified as 'unadoptable', yet they are included in the shelter statistics. Programs that catch feral cats sterilize and release them, are demonstrating success in reducing their numbers.

Meanwhile, well run animal shelters have become victims of their own success. In order to keep their doors open and justify new million dollar facilities and salaries, some animal shelters have found a 'new' source of dogs by importing them by the thousands! Here in Wisconsin, animal shelters in Green Bay and Milwaukee have a pet under-population problem and have been importing thousands of puppies into the state for the past several years. Through the PetSmart Charities Rescue Waggin', they have brought in puppies from Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee and Kentucky-as many as 50 at a time. The *Green Bay Press Gazette* reported in December that the 32 dogs arriving Thursday evening (Dec.6, 07) were expected to be "adopted out by this weekend." Other shelters within the state have available dogs, so rather than bring in animals from other states, why not first assist the smaller Wisconsin shelters by placing their surplus dogs? Could it be that by emptying shelters around the state, it would be difficult (if not impossible), to continue the illusion that a 'pet overpopulation' problem exists? The PetSmart program is not exclusive to Wisconsin. Shelters in many other areas of the country are participating. The Rescue Waggin' transports puppies from shelters struggling to find homes to areas where the demand for dogs is higher than the supply. That's a win-win situation for all, especially the dogs. However, to continue the charade of claiming a 'pet overpopulation' problem exists is dishonest. Another concern is that the thousands of animals being transferred from one shelter to another are being tallied twice, creating an impression that there are far more homeless pets than actually exist. "Animal shelters in the USA are casting a wide net-from Puerto Rico to as far as Taiwan-to fill kennels. Critics say many shelters have solved the stray problem in their own area, but rather than shut down, they become *de facto* pet stores. Some charge more than \$200 per adoption for imported dogs," reports *USA Today*. More than 14,000 strays have been shipped in from Puerto Rico and many thousands more are being imported from Mexico, India and the Bahamas each year. Agencies in So. Calif. Created the Border Puppy Task Force after they saw a surprising number of very young dogs being brought across the border from Mexico. The task force estimated that during a one-year span, 10,000 puppies entered San Diego County. There are legitimate concerns that animal shelters importing stray dogs from foreign countries may be importing disease as well. Besides health issues, these street dogs lack proper socialization and may have poor temperaments. Is it ethical for animal

shelters to expose the public to these unknowns, while condemning anyone who breeds a litter in our country? I don't think so.

The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy was formed in the early 1990's. Some member groups such as the AHA (American Humane Assoc.), AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Assoc.) and even the Humane Society of the U.S (HSUS) sent out questionnaires to animal shelters around the country seeking to compile statistics for the numbers of intake animals, animals reclaimed by owners, those who found new homes and euthanasia. Due to the low number of shelters willing to respond, the study was discontinued a decade ago. So without insisting on reliable statistics and factual evidence to back up their claims, we have allowed the fox to patrol the hen house. We can no longer blindly accept the pie-in-the-sky guesstimate groups such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and other similar agenda-driven animal extremists put forth. Follow the money. These are organizations whose very existence are dependent upon the amount of money they can raise from misguided animal lovers *who think their donation is actually helping puppies, kittens or their local animal shelter*. The reality is that these animal rights fanatics seek to impose their vegan lifestyle and utopian dream for humans to have zero contact with animals. *"But as the surplus of dogs and cats (artificially engineered by centuries of forced breeding) declined, eventually companion animals would be phased out, and we would return to a more symbolic relationship enjoyment at a distance."* –a direct quote from Ingrid Newkirk, PETA co-founder and president, in the *Harper's Forum Book* (Jack Hitt, ed. 1989)

Is that the kind of future the majority of the U.S. citizens envision? I don't believe so. The lunatic animal rights movement does not represent mainstream American views or values. So how do we solve the problem? *"The key is to get raw data. How many animals are coming in and how many are going home alive? And, is that improving every single year? Because if it is not, there is a serious problem with the leadership and the mechanisms going on within that shelter."* –as quoted by the director of the No Kill Advocacy Center, Nathan J. Winograd. "Not counting animals PETA held only temporarily in its spay-neuter program, the organization took in 3,061 "companion animals" in 2006, of which it killed 2,981. According to Virginia's Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), the average euthanasia rate for humane societies in the state was just 34.7% in 2006. PETA killed 97.4% of the animals it took in. The organization filed its 2006 report just recently, several months after the VDACS deadline of March 31, 2007," reveals The Center for Consumer Freedom. In other states where shelters are required to report their statistics, euthanasia rates are alarming. Michigan reports approx. 45% of dogs and 75% of cats that enter their animal shelters are killed.

As dog owners, I think we are deeply disturbed over the plight of animals in shelters and the high rate of euthanasia. There is a solution. Nathan Winograd has proven his "No Kill Revolution" method works-in both large and small shelters. As dog breeders and trainers, *we are the experts*, so it is up to us to step forward and assist our local shelters in overcoming their problems. The first step is to stop blaming pet breeders and lay to rest, once and for all, the myth of "pet overpopulation." It's time to embrace the fact that we have a pet under-population situation..and so, the solution to our local animal shelter problems is within our grasp.