

## **Confiscated dogs force others to be euthanized to make room at shelter**

**By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter**

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LAS CRUCES - Officials at the Doña Ana County-Las Cruces animal shelter say they'll have to euthanize more than four dozen dogs this week to make room for 12 pit bulls from an unresolved dog fighting case that are set to be transferred to the facility at the end of the week.

The pit bulls must be moved to the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley because a grant that has been paying for their care at another site is set to expire July 1, said Curtis Childress, supervisor of the county's Animal Control Division. He said the department doesn't have the manpower or money to care for the animals, so housing them at the shelter is the only option.

The pit bulls were among a number of dogs confiscated by the county in August 2007 in Chaparral from twin brothers Daron and Duryea Scott. Their case, which entails allegations of dog fighting and animal abuse, is pending before the New Mexico Court of Appeals.

Meanwhile, because the Scotts didn't agree to turn over ownership of the animals to the county, as sometimes happens following animal abuse or hoarding allegations, the county must care for the animals until the case is resolved.

The 12 pit bulls are slated to be moved to the shelter on Friday or Saturday, Childress said.

Shelter director Beth Vesco-Mock said the dogs will require one cage apiece because of their aggressive nature, spaces that each currently house at least two other dogs. To make room, she said, the existing dogs - 56 adults and puppies - must be euthanized.

In addition, Vesco-Mock said, the pit bulls' presence will reduce the shelter's overall capacity, which means the shelter will continue to have to euthanize more dogs than it would if it didn't have to house the pit bulls.

"Those runs wouldn't be available for regular strays or regular holds, where I hold animals to try to get them up for adoption or rescue, so I'd be killing animals every day because of those runs being used by the court-holds," she said.

Some animal welfare proponents have complained that animals involved in abuse and hoarding cases, so-called court-held animals, take up valuable space in the overcrowded shelter.

Vesco-Mock estimated the shelter presently has "over 100 court-holds," which accounts for about 20 percent of the animal population at the shelter.

Childress said the county has been paying for the care of the pit bulls using a grant from the Legislature. Much of the expense comes from paying salaries for three part-time personnel who each work about 20 hours a week, he said. At a \$9 per-hour salary, that puts the weekly cost of the care at \$540 per week.

Before the grant became available, Childress said, county animal control staff were caring for the pit bulls, but oftentimes they were volunteering their time, a practice he said he can't revert to because of employment rules. He said he also can't reassign one of the eight animal control officers to the job of caring for the dogs because all the positions are needed to respond to calls from the public.

Childress said the sheriff's department, which oversees the animal control division, is working to build a facility of its own to house court-held animals. But once it's in place, finding operational dollars will continue to be a challenge, he said.

Childress confirmed that the pit bulls can't be housed with other dogs. He said, however, the animals are friendly to people.

"They're definitely animal-aggressive," he said.

Vesco-Mock, too, said she's not worried that the dogs will be dangerous to staff.

Vesco-Mock said the pit bulls will strain the shelter's operations.

"We're hoping something happens, and they don't come through those doors," she said.

A law passed in this year's legislative session allows district judges to order that defendants in animal hoarding and abuse cases post a bond to pay for the care of their animals. Childress said the measure doesn't go into effect until July 1 and wouldn't apply in this case because it is not retroactive.

The shelter, called the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, is overseen by a board of Las Cruces and Doña Ana County elected officials.

Diana M. Alba can be reached at [dalba@lcsun-news.com](mailto:dalba@lcsun-news.com); (575) 541-5443

### **If you adopt**

What: adopting pets from the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley

When:

- noon to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday

- noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Where: Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, 3551 Bataan Memorial West, Las Cruces

Info:

- 382-0018

- cat adoption fee: \$50

- dog adoption fee: \$75