

Mother, son may face more dogfighting charges

By Ashley Meeks Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES - Additional charges are possible in the case of a mother and son indicted by a grand jury on dog-fighting charges from 2008.

A total of 36 pit bulls, 26 indoor and feral cats and two mixed-breed dogs were seized last September from the Duttles residence, a mobile home on four acres obscured by high weeds in the 300 block of Vine Avenue in Mesquite.

Nicholas Duttles, 28, and former dog breeder Sharon Duttles, 47, were indicted by a Do-a Ana County grand jury last week on 63 total charges of dog fighting, conspiracy to commit dog fighting, nine counts of extreme cruelty to animals, cruelty to animals, multiple animal site permit, number of animals allowed and intact animal permit, according to documents filed Oct. 1 by the district attorney's office in state District Court.

Arraignment has been scheduled for Oct. 19.

The investigation is far from over, said county Animal Control Director Curtis Childress. Additional felony charges, including charges for drugs believed to have been used on the animals, are pending, he said. Sharon Duttles told Childress in 2008 the dogs received veterinary treatment in Mexico, according to court documents, and a forensic veterinarian found signs of injected narcotics commonly used by dog fighters.

She allegedly told Childress "all of her dogs are healthy" but one, and that if officials said her dogs were fighting dogs "then we are just going to put them all to sleep."

Most of the animals are still at the animal shelter, said Childress. Animal control is preparing to petition the court to have the Duttles pay for the animals' care, estimated at \$160,000 since the original seizure.

No matter what happens, Childress said he wants to ensure the dogs never again return to a fighting life. Some of the dogs seized had their teeth filed flat or filed sharp and showed fighting scars on their face, ears and legs, according to court documents.

"It's just kind of a sad state of affairs when you're looking at dogs and some of them are obviously the 'bait' dogs because they've got their teeth filed down," said Childress, who said those dogs are now in stable condition and able to eat. "I just remember looking at the teeth of some of them and thinking, my God, why would you do that to an animal?"

Inside the home - described in court documents as cluttered with trash, even in the bathtubs, stripped of carpet and with the plywood floor saturated and smelling of urine and feces - investigators recovered documents on dog fighting and equipment that may be used to train dogs to fight, 19 boxes of videotapes, photographs, journals, computer hard drives and injectable medication, including IVs. Cat litter boxes were found, overflowing, and Sharon Duttles said she and her other son, Shawn, didn't have beds and slept on blankets on the floor.

Due to "flystrike," or maggots feeding off their open wounds, and heartworm, 14 dogs were euthanized last September and October, authorities said.

According to court documents, the other dogs and cats were reported variously to be emaciated, deaf, unable to stand, infested with ticks and fleas, suffering from eye injuries, infections, heartworm, open sores and tumors - one as large as a grapefruit. One, with multiple old injuries, showed "major neurological signs. Could hardly walk, has 'star gaze,' swaying of head and snapping at the air."

Officers also found graves where more dogs were believed to be buried.

Ashley Meeks can be reached at ameeks@lcsun-news.com; (575) 541-5462