

## **Program focuses on bond between humans, animals**

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LAS CRUCES - Who can resist puppy dog eyes - those teardrop-shaped orbs staring at you, full of love and trust? The thought evokes warm feelings in the heart.

Those warm feelings are a bond between us and our furry friends. The Department of Animal and Range Sciences at New Mexico State University will explore that bond with two new courses as part of the newly developed companion animal program.

"The College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences is very progressive in their vision that companion animals are a huge area of interest and we need to fill a niche for our society and the people who we serve in New Mexico and the United States," said Gaylene Fassenko, the new assistant professor in the department who will be teaching the courses. "We also need to provide information on companion animals so students are better prepared when they move on to veterinary school."

Even in a time when the economy is slow, people are still focused on taking care of their companion animals. In 1994, people in the country spent about \$17 billion on their pets. In 2009, that number was \$45 billion.

"The pet industry is a multibillion dollar industry - \$17 billion for pet food alone. Therefore, by providing a companion animal program, we will open new career paths for our graduates," said Tim Ross, interim department head.

One course (ANSC 112) focuses on companion animals in society, the history of how they came to be, when animals were first domesticated, and how their roles have changed from the past to what we can expect from them in the future.

Dogs were the first companion animals that were domesticated, before sheep and other livestock, Fassenko said, and evidence shows they may have evolved from wolves 15,000 years ago. Research shows that cats were domesticated approximately 9,000 years ago and horses 6,000 years ago.

Traditionally, dogs have been used for hunting or for protection. Because of their keen sense of smell, they are being used now to detect cell phones in prison, or explosives or illegal drugs at airports and public places. Fassenko said in the course the students will explore related jobs as well as what kinds of services dogs - and other companion animals - can offer to humans in the future.

Fassenko will also teach a course (ANSC 251) about companion animals and the human-animal bond that will focus on the science behind that connection. The bond humans and dogs have has led to new jobs, such as specially trained dogs being brought into courtrooms to bring comfort to traumatized children who are testifying in cases. Using companion animals as therapy animals has been an emerging field for the past 20 years. Students in this class will be able to learn more about the role assisted therapy and service animals play in society, as well as the positive and negative interactions between people and companion animals.

For example, many people are unaware that the majority of animal bites occur between an animal and a person who is known to that animal.

On the other hand, a trained therapy animal can bring joy and motivation to a person who does not want to participate in physical therapy but is willing to throw a ball to an eager dog. Both benefit from the bonding game, but the person also has an added benefit of exercising.

"Using companion animals in the roles of assisted therapy or as new types of service animals, such as for seizure detection, is an up-and-coming field," Fassenko said. "The human-animal bond is a huge multidisciplinary area, and

I think many times, people have not provided it with the credibility that it deserves. With more research being conducted now, it will hopefully gain more credibility.”

Both classes will focus mainly on dogs, cats and horses, but other companion animals will also be explored. The two courses will be offered as electives in the department, and no prerequisites are required. Students do not have to be working toward a degree in veterinary medicine to take these courses, and Fassenko hopes that students in the fields of nursing, education, physical therapy, psychology and sociology will also take the classes.

Anyone who plans to work in a field related to companion animals, such as in a pet store, animal shelter or feed store, can benefit, as well as students who just want to learn more about the bond between them and their little - or big - companion.

The program will complement the companion animal management course already established that focuses on dogs, cats, lizards and amphibians, and pocket pets such as guinea pigs.

“The companion animal program will meet a growing interest of our students. Many of our majors are interested in a career in veterinary medicine. Many of these are from an urban background where their animal experience is companion animals,” Ross said. “So, we anticipate that this program will attract more students into our major, and by meeting their interests, we will retain more students.”

Fassenko joined the NMSU team this spring from a position as an associate professor of poultry embryology at the University of Alberta in Canada. When she heard about the companion animal program being expanded at NMSU, the professor, who has always had a passion for companion animals and enlists the aid of her own terriers as therapy animals, knew that this was the right move for her and her family.

“The faculty here just got it,” she said. “This institution is so supportive, and they know that this is going to be a huge topic. It just blows my mind that more universities have not picked up on the importance companion animals have in our lives.”

Audry Olmsted is an assistant editor at the NMSU-Alamogordo campus.