

On the positive side

New program informs Doña Ana County breeders of their obligations

By Thomas Hoeksema For the Sun-News

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With a well-documented problem of unwanted dogs and cats in Doña Ana County and an unconscionable number of euthanasias at our shelter (Mesilla Valley Animal Services Center), county animal control officers have been concerned for some time about the high volume of puppies-for-sale advertisements that appear in local and regional publications.

Dozens of new ads are published each week with more than 60 different breeds represented in a given year. A great majority of the ads appear in a regional want-ad publication that serves six counties in southern New Mexico including Doña Ana County. Ads for Chihuahuas and pit bulls predominate, but it is common to see ads for exotic breeds as well. The profusion of ads for puppy litters suggests an active and substantial market in our area for a wide range of puppy breeds. There are few ads for kittens and, disturbingly, many of those offer the kittens for free.

In my capacity as a reserve animal control officer, I proposed to county animal control supervisor Curtis Childress that we examine the implications of the puppy litter market in our county. From our discussions emerged a new program called PUPS - Puppies Under Permit Scrutiny. The program has two components at this time - all local advertisements for puppies are being documented and sellers are being contacted to advise them of their responsibilities in relation to county ordinances.

Under current animal control ordinances and county business regulations, anyone advertising puppies or kittens for sale must acquire a litter permit (\$10 per litter), intact permits (\$20 and required for all un-neutered dogs in the county older than three months, male and female); and a business license (\$35). In addition, the litter permit number needs to appear in all puppy or kitten advertisements.

Preliminary data have yielded some interesting results. Sixty-five percent of the ads originated in counties other than Doña Ana and are not subject to our permit and license regulations. Nineteen percent of the ads came from residents of Las Cruces who are also not subject to county ordinances. Currently, Las Cruces Animal Control does not require litter or intact permits. Only 17 percent of the puppy and kitten ads were sent in by Doña Ana County residents. Because the regional want ad publication is distributed to seven counties, it is not possible to determine the number of sales in Doña Ana County. After cross-referencing phone numbers and ad information across the sample issues of the publication, it appears that, at this time, no puppy mills are openly operating in the county.

During phone calls to sellers, 33 percent of them indicated that the advertised litter was a "mistake or accidental," or strictly a one-time occurrence. Ominously, 25 percent noted that they had great difficulty selling all the puppies. Not a single county seller had proper permits or license to sell puppies or kittens.

What is the purpose and desired outcome of the PUPS program? It is not intended to harass pet breeders. It is designed primarily to inform breeders who reside in Doña Ana County that there are permits and business regulations that will be enforced, and to explain the need for such oversight. The income generated by the program is incidental to the central goal of PUPS - to make animal breeders more responsible and thoughtful and to make them more aware of the consequences of pet breeding. Achieving compliance with permit statutes is one way of holding breeders accountable for the well-being of the litters they produce. It is hoped that enforcement of permit regulations will ultimately reduce the animal population in the county and make pet adoption at the shelter a more attractive option.

More information on permits and licenses required to advertise animal litters can be obtained by contacting the Doña Ana County Animal Control office at (575) 525-8846.

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More information

•To report animal concerns, contact Animal Control Dispatch (for City & County) at (575) 526-0795.