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USDA Announces Landmark Rule to Crack Down on Online Puppy Mills

Tens of thousands of dogs suffering in substandard, filthy, and overcrowded cages for years on end will finally get the protection they deserve as a result of a rule the U.S. Department of Agriculture will formally adopt today. This change, a long-held aspiration for The HSUS, the Humane Society Legislative Fund, and the Doris Day Animal League, is decades in the making and will extend federal oversight to thousands of puppy mills that do business online.

Of the dozens of puppy mills that The HSUS has assisted in closing down over the past five years, the vast majority were selling puppies online and escaping any federal oversight because a loophole in federal Animal Welfare Act regulations exempts Internet sellers. Because large-scale dog breeders who sell animals to pet stores are regulated, but breeders who sell directly to the public are not, there has been a massive migration of breeders to the latter sales strategy within the last decade or so. If they could sell dogs and escape any federal oversight, why not get in on that act and continue to cut corners on animal care?



Meredith Lee/The HSUS

Ricky Bobby was among 58 dogs The HSUS rescued from a North Carolina puppy mill in February 2013. The operator was selling puppies over the Internet.

The HSUS, HSLF, and DDAL pointed out that it was fundamentally unfair that people involved in the same underlying business enterprise (breeding dogs to sell for profit) would face entirely different regulatory standards. It was a circumstance ripe for fraud and misrepresentation. Internet sellers of puppies often displayed images of puppies frolicking in open fields. In reality, the dogs were languishing, crammed inside feces-encrusted cages, receiving no protection from

the elements and no veterinary care whatever. And until the legal standard was modified, the federal government couldn't take action because none of these mills required federal licensing and inspection.

Due to pressure from The HSUS and DDAL, the USDA's inspector general looked into enforcement of the rules governing dog breeding, finding appalling abuses of the dogs, deficient exercise of authority by USDA where it had authority, and identification of this glaring gap in the law that allowed Internet sellers to evade any federal oversight whatever. It was that OIG report, combined with our advocacy efforts in Congress and with the Obama administration that finally compelled federal action.

We thank the Obama administration and the USDA for bringing new standards of care to thousands of puppies, but also to kittens, rabbits and other warm-blooded animals who are often raised in inhumane facilities and sold as pets over the Internet, by mail or by phone, sight-unseen.

The HSUS and HSLF called on supporters to act in 2011, and 32,000 people signed a petition urging the Obama administration to crack down on unregulated puppy mills. When the USDA proposed an actual change in its regulations in 2012, HSUS members and other animal advocates generated 350,000 public signatures and comments in support.

There has been strong bipartisan support in Congress for closing the "Internet loophole" in the Animal Welfare Act regulations. Federal legislation, S. 395 and H.R. 847 – known as the PUPS Act, or "Puppy Uniform Protection and Safety Act" – sponsored by Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill. and David Vitter, R-La., and Reps. Jim Gerlach, R-Pa., Sam Farr, D-Calif., Bill Young, R-Fla., and Lois Capps, D-Calif., galvanized members of Congress in support of efforts to finalize and implement the rule.

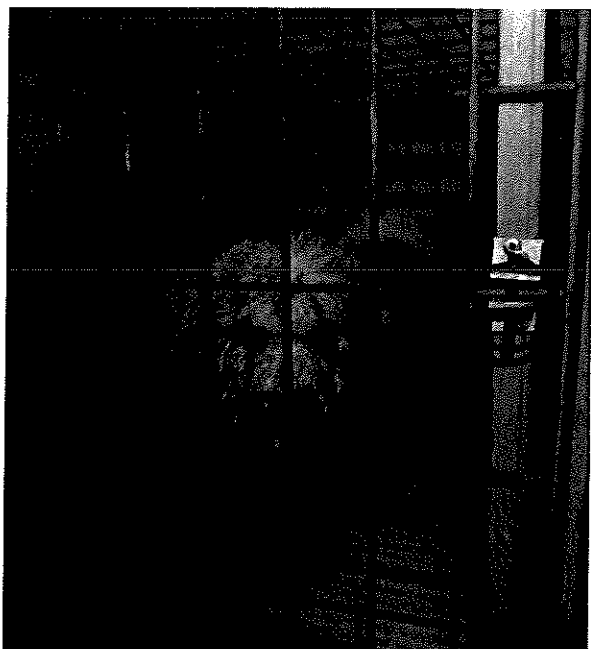
Puppy mills aren't going away overnight, and it's still important for any potential puppy buyer to meet the breeder in person at his or her facility to see how and where a puppy was born and raised. But this rule has the potential to allow federal inspectors to peer behind the closed doors of puppy mills and improve the lives of tens of thousands of animals. That is a change worth celebrating, and we thank our supporters, the USDA, and our allies in Congress for supporting this significant step.

Internet Puppy Sellers: No Federal License Required

Currently large-scale, commercial dog breeders who sell puppies for resale to brokers or pet stores are required to be federally licensed and inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). But a gaping loophole in the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) regulations has allowed commercial breeders who sell puppies online, by mail or over the phone to evade oversight. Such facilities, even those with hundreds of dogs, are not inspected by the USDA and can sell thousands of puppies a year to consumers. A new rule proposed by the USDA would close the loophole in the Animal Welfare Act regulations that has allowed many abusive puppy mills to flourish for decades sight-unseen.



The dog pictured above was one of 124 dogs seized by the Pearl River County Sheriff's Department in Carriere, MS with the assistance of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in July 2010. Many of the rescued dogs were suffering from severe malnourishment, painful infections, parasites and infectious diseases. The animals were being housed in cramped, unsanitary conditions without proper medical care. Two dead animals were also removed from the property. The breeders were not required to have a USDA license since they had been selling puppies to consumers online and via classified ads.



In February 2009, The HSUS assisted Wayne County Animal Control with the rescue of 283 dogs from Thornton's Kennels near Goldsboro, NC. Many of the dogs, including the one pictured on the left, were emaciated, had untreated lacerations, severely matted fur and serious skin and eye infections. They were being housed in small cages in cold, unventilated barns. The breeder was selling puppies over the Internet and through classified advertisements, and therefore was not required to have a USDA license. After operating for decades, the breeder was convicted of twelve counts of animal cruelty. Had she been required to have a USDA license and regular inspections, these

horrendous abuses likely could have ended much sooner or could have been avoided altogether.

In August 2008, The HSUS assisted in rescuing nearly 1,000 dogs from a puppy mill in Parkersburg, W.V. The puppies were being sold online on a beautiful website that featured clean and healthy-looking puppies. The reality was much different as seen in the photo below. Many of the dogs found at the facility were filthy, severely underweight, unsocialized and housed in dirty and cramped cages.

The proposed change to the AWA regulations would require the following:

- Large-scale breeders who sell puppies over the Internet or by phone or mail order will now be required to be federally licensed and inspected just like breeders who sell to pet stores.
- The rule will not affect home breeders who sell puppies from their own properties and allow prospective buyers to personally observe the animals on site.
- Small breeders with just a handful of female breeding dogs will continue to be exempt from coverage.

