

One Welfare: A View of Commercial Dog Breeding

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“Those people run a puppy mill.”

Words matter. What we say and what we hear creates immediate impressions. Word choice can swing a person from thinking rationally to reacting emotionally. The term “puppy mill” evokes emotional images of dogs in poor conditions and little or no care. “Puppy mill” is a term intended to conjure up very unfavorable feelings toward the owner of the facility. The professional, legal term for people who breed dogs on a large scale is “commercial dog breeder.” This term has a definition in Indiana and all other states with regulations covering dog breeding facilities.

In Indiana, anyone with more than 20 sexually intact breeding females older than one year of age must be licensed as a commercial dog breeder. Registration with the Indiana State Board of Animal Health (BOAH) is required regardless of whether the animals are housed in one or multiple locations or, if all are on one property, how many owners are involved. (Some exemptions are allowed for hunting dog and service animal breeders.)

Consider, for a moment, the best practices for a swine breeding facility. The most common and currently accepted method of housing gestating sows is in individual stalls. While animal rights groups push against individual housing for gilts/sows, the pork industry and veterinary profession can point to many benefits of individually housing the animals: The sows are in an environmentally controlled building, they have access to water and nutrition appropriate for the individual, and are free from competition or aggression from other animals.

Now consider how dog breeding facilities handle their breeding females: Most commercial breeders typically house one or two compatible dogs in each kennel. Small-breed dogs are housed in environmentally controlled buildings (some allow indoor/outdoor access) with a required temperature range. Dogs have access to water and nutrition appropriate for the individual, and are free from competition or aggression from other animals (regulations require that dogs housed together be compatible).

How can a best practice in one situation be a horrible practice in another? Swine have been shown to be as intelligent, if not more so, than dogs. We can extrapolate that both types of animals understand their surroundings. Even as veterinarians, our emotional response to dogs as companion animals vs. swine as livestock can color our interpretation of the exact same situation for each species.

With a science-based attitude, we as veterinarians can understand that any type of management system can be run well or run poorly. The size and scale of the operation does not dictate whether the animals within the operation are well treated. Instead, *how the operation is managed* determines the quality of welfare for the animals. A large operation may

have adequate employees to provide appropriate care for the animals, whereas a small operation may find the owner too overwhelmed to provide adequate care for his/her animals. People—not the scale—make the difference in the animals' quality of life.

Dogs have been specifically bred to provide companionship and/or service to people. We expect dogs to have contact with people. Commercial dog breeders observe their dogs on a daily basis and while they may not interact extensively with the individual dogs, does that differ from the family dog chained or kenneled in the backyard that sees a person for a few minutes once a day?

When we think about One Welfare, all types of animal production systems provide for the welfare of people. Livestock production provides for the physical welfare of the general public by creating wholesome food and fiber production. Companion animals, such as dogs, produced specifically to provide companionship to people provide emotional support for families and individuals, improving the people's mental welfare. As veterinarians, we need to become educated about animal production methods (livestock as well as companion) and the regulations surrounding them, then consider rational, scientific information, not emotional feelings or advertising campaigns. In doing so, we can provide sound, science-based answers to clients and the public about the welfare of animals in any production system, including commercial dog breeding.

Like any industry—from automakers to stockbrokers—commercial breeding of dogs has had its bad actors. But, they are the minority. Critics, however, have condemned all commercial dog breeders.

Indiana's dog breeding industry has garnered an excellent national reputation for raising healthy, high-quality, well-socialized offspring, increasing demand for Hoosier pups. The industry organization, Indiana Council for Animal Welfare (ICAW) has been actively working to educate its members and provide resources and information to raise the standard for commercial breeding statewide. ICAW actively works with BOAH to improve industry-regulatory communication.

We veterinarians need to build relationships with those in this industry to ensure valid veterinary-client-patient relationships that offer the best care and standards for these dogs.

If you, or any of your clients, suspects any animal, livestock or companion, is being neglected or abused, contact your local animal control agency to make a report.

Information about Indiana's Commercial Dog Breeder and Broker program and its regulations is available on the BOAH website at: www.in.gov/boah/2549.htm

SIDEBAR:

Key requirements for Commercial Dog Breeders in Indiana

- Licensing for anyone with 20+ sexually intact females older than 1 year
- Must abide by USDA regulations
- Minimum enclosure space based on the size of the animal sufficient for the dog(s) to stand and move freely
- Adequate space to get off wire flooring, if used
- Space/opportunity for exercise
- Humidity, temperature and air flow standards
- Veterinarian-of-record

Additionally: In November, USDA began licensing anyone who sells dogs to pet stores for resale or online without face-to-face contact with the final customer.