

Good breeding practices urged for dog farms

Animal activists want entry barriers and measurable standards for industry

By **KIMBERLY SPYKERMAN,**
CAROLYN QUEK & GRACE CHUA

WITHIN the kennels at Pasir Ris Farmway 2 are thousands of dogs that spend their lives producing puppies, mostly for the 45 pet stores in Singapore.

The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority's (AVA) count of the number of such breeding dogs: 3,600, up from 2,300 in 2001.

Scattered over 10 licensed dog farms, their welfare is causing concern among animal activists, especially after 75 breeding dogs were abandoned last month when their owner gave up his business.

There has been a boom in the dog breeding business over the years, but the activists say regula-

tions and penalties have not kept pace.

"You get a worse penalty for vandalising a car than for cruelty to animals," said Mr Ricky Yeo of Action for Singapore Dogs.

Several animal welfare groups and shelters such as Action for Singapore Dogs and Mutts & Mittens met last month to discuss possible solutions to the problem of "irresponsible" breeders. They want measurable yardsticks for what is considered acceptable breeding conditions and some barriers to entry into the largely unregulated industry.

Only recently has the AVA introduced standards and guidelines.

In 2007, it required all licensed dogs to be microchipped. In the same year, it introduced a grading system so customers know which pet stores are up to the mark. Last year, it published more than 20 guidelines for all pet shops as well as breeding farms to follow, such as providing suitable flooring for all caged animals, among others.

Then from January, it required staff in pet stores and farms to go for training in pet animal manage-



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ST PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

ment and welfare.

AVA's animal welfare assistant director, Dr Lou Ek Hee, told The Straits Times that dog farms are inspected once every two months. Officers look at the general condition of the farms, size of cages, number of dogs on the premises, cleanliness and ventilation.

The Straits Times observed that in some of the farms' shops, a number of dogs were housed in cages far too small for them, leaving them with no room to turn around. In other cases, two or three dogs were placed in a single cage. This violates the AVA's guidelines for cage sizes.

The farms do not allow casual visitors and customers into the back where breeding dogs are kept. At some kennels, the stench was overpowering.

While there are just 10 licensed farms, owners can rent out space on their premises to several breeders, charging between \$2,600 and \$6,000 a month depending on the space leased out.

Breeders do not even have business names; they go by kennel numbers. At Pet Hotel, there are nine kennels housing as many as 100 dogs each advertising the sale of puppies.

Five breeders The Straits Times spoke to said they did not allow customers to look at the conditions in the kennels. When reporters posed as customers, kennel owners were willing to make a sale - with no questions asked about ability of the buyers to care for the animals.

Said one kennel owner: "I'm a businessman at the end of the day. Screen my customers?"

The going rate for puppies at some kennels is much cheaper than at pet shops. At one kennel, for example, a male chihuahua was being sold for less than \$500 without pedigree papers, when the average market price for this breed is at least \$1,000.

One kennel owner, however, did say he could provide pedigree papers but at an additional cost.

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Homes found for nearly half of rescued canines

By **GRACE CHUA**

THE dogs rescued from a Pasir Ris kennel last month are putting on the pounds and are happier, say rescuers.

And nearly half of them have already been adopted or fostered out to new homes.

A group of rescuers bought over the adult dogs, of various breeds, after a breeder gave them up, saying he could not manage his dog farm.

Recently, there has been an Internet posting, and an SMS has been making the rounds, stating that the dogs will be put down by May 17 if they are not adopted.

But Mr Derrick Tan, 29, one of the original rescuers, said this was not true.

He said the dogs are housed at a shelter in Pasir Ris, and those who wish to adopt them can visit dogmillrehomers.blogspot.com or e-mail dogmillrehomers@hotmail.com for more details.

The site also provides information on the condition of the adopted dogs.

To date, rescuers have amassed about

\$19,000 in donations through the vet clinic Allpets and Aqualife Vets, and through pet shelter the Mutts and Mittens Foundation. The sum raised will go towards housing, feeding and treating the animals till they find homes.

Previously, Mr Tan and his friends had spent \$11,000 to rescue, treat and feed the dogs.

Some have criticised the rescuers for buying over the dogs from the breeder and thus possibly encouraging more such "dumping" of unwanted dogs.

Responding to this, Mr Tan said: "If you can save one life, it's a good thing. We changed the lives of 75 dogs."

If faced with a similar situation now, he said he would do things differently, by informing the authorities first and organising more volunteers to handle emergency care.

"At the time, it was a very urgent situation. If we hadn't made a decision, at least half the dogs would probably have been passed to other breeders," Mr Tan said.

Or, he added, some of the sicker dogs might have died.

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Activists and vets say some unscrupulous breeders knowingly in-breed the dogs to select for looks or a sweet temperament. What buyers get are sick puppies with genetic problems like arthritis and hip dysplasia.

Veterinarian Cathy Chan said common problems she has treated in breeding dogs are contagious skin diseases like scabies and mange, as well as heartworm and tick fever - diseases that are easily transmitted because of the crowded conditions.

She has even found stitches in the uterus of breeding dogs she sterilised, indicating that they had been impregnated not long after their caesarean sections.

The AVA is hoping that the new requirements on staff training in animal management will arm the breeders with some knowledge on what to do.

The authority rarely punishes errant owners and breeders, preferring to coax or warn them into compliance.

But if it receives complaints from the public about breeders behaving badly and starts investigations, it hopes that the whistle-blowers will testify to what they have seen.

"AVA as the authority cannot just go and take action based on hearsay," said Dr Lou.

Ultimately, AVA hopes that the industry will be able to regulate itself, as is the practice in countries like Australia, Britain and the United States.

Dr Wong Hon Mun, the agency's deputy director for risk communication, said: "Essentially, we would like to see industry standards go up and once they up the standards, then they will be in a better position to look into all the things that AVA is looking into, like welfare, and eventually move into self regulation."

This will take a few years, so the agency has to work with the industry to set standards, he added.

Customers, too, need to step up their game and learn about responsible pet ownership.

"If the consumer makes an effort to be informed, then you'll only go to the farms or shops with good standards. (Those with) bad standards will not be able to carry on...so in this case, this is self-regulation, but by the consumer," Dr Lou added.

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