

Backyard breeders fuel dog overpopulation

By Andrea Damewood

The Register-Guard

Published: Monday, December 25, 2006

Four purebred Cocker Spaniels were taken to Greenhill Humane Society last week, victims of neglect by a backyard breeder unable to pay for veterinary care.

Cases involving out-of-control breeders are especially frustrating for shelter workers because Lane County already faces an animal overpopulation crisis.

"It happens more often than not," Greenhill Operations Director Theresa Iverson said. "It's common, unfortunately, people just get overwhelmed."

Many people start breeding to supplement their income, or as a hobby, Iverson said. What they don't realize, she said, is how much it costs to raise a brood of puppies: food, vaccinations and veterinary exams. Iverson estimated the cost to care for a litter of five to six pups at about \$200 to \$400.

The man who surrendered the four spaniels, age 7 months to 1 year, was unable to sell them before they got too large, Iverson said. The dogs then began to eat more and developed an ear problem common to the breed that he could not afford to treat. All but one of the dogs had been adopted by Saturday evening.

If purebred breeding is done correctly, breeders should actually lose money, said Sylvia Calderwood, who breeds Shelties and is a member of the Eugene Kennel Club.

Calderwood said she loses \$10,000 to \$15,000 each year because she has every puppy screened for a variety of genetic disorders, vaccinated and examined.

"There's different kinds of breeders," she said. "There's the responsible, sincere student of a breed, and there's backyard breeders. Our dogs never, ever end up at an animal shelter."

Calderwood attributed that to a promise she makes to potential owners: Her dogs can be returned at any age and will have a permanent home. She also requires every buyer to sign a contract to ensure that their new puppy will be spayed or neutered.

Calderwood has a waiting list for her dogs so every puppy she breeds is guaranteed a home.

Backyard breeders don't have the time or interest in such stringent screening, leaving many of their dogs at risk for health problems later in life, Iverson said.

But buyers themselves are a big part of the reason Iverson sees so many purebreds enter Greenhill's doors.

"People end up buying (puppies) on the spur of the moment," she said. "Puppies are a lot of work; people don't think about that because it's this cute, fuzzy little puppy."

Often, dogs are surrendered after they have outgrown their puppy stage, when owners who haven't put in any work are left with an untrained animal, she said.

Several months after Christmas or following the release of movies featuring a certain breed, Greenhill will see a rush of young dogs.

"After '101 Dalmatians,' about seven months later, we saw Dalmatians in our shelter," Iverson said. "At that point, they need to be trained."

Pit bulls are also bred well beyond the level of demand, she said.

Both responsible breeders and Greenhill stress that the best thing an owner can do to help end animal homelessness is to sterilize their animal.

"There are too many dogs that need homes, and too many puppies being born without homes," Iverson said. "It's just a battle against the overpopulation of dogs."