

## **USDA Rule Change Stuns Online Pet Retailers**

Have you purchased a dog online recently? Did you purchase from a reputable breeder or a puppy mill representing itself as a reputable purebred dog breeder? Can you tell the difference? Perhaps you are thinking of adopting a dog from an online rescue organization. How can you tell which organizations to trust?

My clients have shared their experiences with on line adoptions and purchases of dogs during their new dog physical examination visit. One situation is a family arrives with a purebred puppy they bought online from a “breeder”. Before I do a physical exam I have no idea if the organization is a reputable breeder or a puppy mill. After physical exam some of the puppies have severe problems and don’t seem to be bred well at all. Unfortunately puppy mills are now able to mass market their puppies online to unsuspecting pet owners who think that all purebred puppies are born with the same genetics and health. This just isn’t the case. If a breeder repeatedly breeds within the same families of dogs the puppies will have genetic predilections for more congenital problems such as heart murmurs cleft palate and orthopedic deformities that impair their mobility.

Most recently we had a beautiful little Chihuahua named Lily come in. On the first visit it was diagnosed with a heart arrhythmia and by the third visit a congenital hip problem that required orthopedic surgery. Clearly the breeding had not been done in a responsible way. This pup was pure bred but the lines were inbred excessively causing the congenital defects. This is a classic sign of a very poor and uncaring breeder with the bottom line being all about the money not the future welfare and health of the pup. Lily’s heart arrhythmia was mild and she did have the surgery and she is recovering quite well.

Another situation is the purchase from online rescue organizations. There are a great many rescue organizations that do great work and help purebred dogs find new homes. Other rescue organizations have worked tirelessly to save pets from Hurricane Katrina and Sandy. They have networks of people who drive the dogs North. Many times they come up in trucks. The dogs are either housed at a foster home for a few weeks or adopted to people right off the truck. I know there are many rescue organizations that save dogs that are neglected and unneutered in the south and transport them north.

Recently the USDA branch in charge of animals, the Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS) changed the definition of a retail pet store precisely because of these online sales of puppies. Apparently the online puppy sellers were considering themselves retail so they could avoid APHIS licensing requirements and inspections that kennels and licensed breeders and perhaps larger breeders (puppy mills) are subject to. The definition of a retail store is now: "A place of business or residence at which the seller, buyer, and the animal available for sale

are physically present so that the buyer may personally observe the animal and help ensure its health prior to purchasing or taking custody of it."

This requirement will force breeders and other businesses that sell pets over the phone internet or mail to obtain a license and submit to APHIS inspections because they are not a retail establishment.

The need for this change was realized in 2010 when the Office of the Inspector General conducted an audit and found that 80% of the pet breeders were conducting their business with no oversight by authorities. This led to the sale of unhealthy puppies to unsuspecting consumers. The rule change only applies to breeders with more than 4 breeding females. The rule includes dogs, cats, birds and pocket pets.

According to the Associated Press, the USDA estimates that the rule will affect up to 4,640 dog breeders, 325 cat breeders, and 75 rabbit breeders.

Many entities will still be exempt from APHIS regulations, including:

- Brick and mortar pet stores
- Many animal rescue groups, pounds, shelters, and humane societies
- People who breed and sell working dogs
- People who sell rabbits for food, fiber (including fur) or for the preservation of bloodlines
- Children who raise rabbits for 4-H projects
- Groups that raise, buy, and sell farm animals for food or fiber
- Businesses that only handle fish, reptiles, and other cold-blooded animals

This new ruling has caused a lot of controversy. Well known behaviorists such as Patricia McConnell, author of "The Other End of the Leash" and many veterinarians are in favor of the new rule. In theory veterinarians who work diligently for APHIS will now be able to find and inspect these large-scale breeders to make sure they maintain the appropriate environment for the pets in their care. On Patricia's Facebook page you can see the controversy as the smaller breeders object to this new regulation possibly forcing them to purchase licenses, build kennels with proper lighting ventilation and flooring, and submit to inspections. Breeders point out that they may have 5 or 6 breeding females but they are more diligent than these large-scale puppy mill operations that may have the required facilities but keep the dogs in bad conditions anyway.

The Office of the Inspector General reviewed the oversight of large breeding operations (mills) in Oklahoma and clearly APHIS animal control inspectors were not enforcing the \$10,000 per offence rule and letting a lot of offences slide leading to terrible conditions for the animals being bred.

Breeders point out If APHIS cannot enforce the rules it already has it is hard to see how they will have the manpower to inspect the 5000 additional online

breeders it is now charged with inspecting. I'm sure APHIS is understaffed and underfunded with our government's current implementation of sequestration and emphasis on military showmanship. Just changing the definition of a word is not going to suddenly save all the pets being abused unless enough veterinarians and animal inspectors are put on the job and given the authority to enforce the laws on record.

I have had clients tell me about breeders who really care about their dogs but they are housing more dogs than the city allows in their home so they only let two out in the yard at a time (in one particular case Dalmatians- they all looked the same) so city inspectors and would never know. The people who play these types of shenanigans will probably continue to do so and be hard to find. Are their conditions better than the conditions that are in these puppy mills? We will only know if we insist on seeing the breeding operation and the breeding dogs onsite.

Patricia McConnell is definitely receiving a lot of heartfelt feedback by small breeders for her stand celebrating the new USDA definition of a retail store. I have to say I stand firmly in her camp. Let the really small breeders carry on but if there or 4 or more females being bred you are no longer a small operation. You have to step up to the plate and build safe environment that can be kept clean and parasite free and submit to inspections. Let's protect the consumer a bit and hope that the breeders that invest in a good environment for the dogs will also breed responsibly.

Finally, always consider that thousands of unclaimed great dogs cats birds and pocket pets are in need of a home. There are plenty of dogs, cats and birds that already need homes at rescue organizations in your town just waiting for you to find them.