



Puppy farms under fire

- Reporter: Jonathan Creek
- Broadcast Date: June 19, 2008

Dogs, in all shapes and sizes, are loyal companions, close mates. No longer do they choose us, we choose them - right down to their genetic make-up.

Designer dogs are bred to please - but when was the last time you thought about where the family pet really comes from?

The public is buying up dogs at a record rate. And with increased demand comes increased business opportunities, meaning 'puppy farms' are booming.

Puppy farms are the hidden industry behind the pet shop window. This is where pet shops get their supply from.

Like most businesses, breeders resort to gimmicks to entice the buyer. Schnauzers crossed with Poodles or 'Schnoodles' and Pugs crossed with Cavaliers, known as Pugaliers, are now the latest must-have breed.

And with half a million dogs sold in pet shops across Australia each year and prices ranging from \$500 to \$1400, it's a lucrative business.

It's no surprise that animal liberationists are against the farming of dogs. They claim the dogs are kept pregnant, which makes perfect business sense: more pups means more profits.

Animal rights activist Debra Rigaldi is campaigning to shut all puppy farms down. A video was taken by her team in an attempt to capture the poor conditions, then used to shame the authorities to act.

Debra has already had success, forcing a farm in Ballarat, west of Melbourne, to close after a very public 10-year battle.

"The dogs have just got a wooden kennel or a tin kennel, or sometimes they've got a 44 gallon drum with a hole cut in the bottom," Debra said.

"There is no bedding for these dogs at all, the water bowls haven't been cleaned and there is just scum floating in the water. So they haven't got access to fresh, clean water."

All her claims were denied by the owners, Colin Hams and his son Matt. They are the other side of the argument.

Colin and Matt have been running ACA breeding kennels for 20 years and have close to 300 dogs on site.

"This side of the floor is actually heated, so the young pups here come in from the whelping shed from two weeks old and that's their first time without their cardboard box around, but the floor is heated there," Colin explained for our camera.

Colin and Matt don't shy away from the fact that they're involved in a controversial industry, but find it unfair that they are now a target, particularly when they aren't breaking any laws.

"I think that their argument is based on a personal opinion of the dog breeding industry as a whole, rather than our particular set up," Colin said.

"We lead the way, there's no question we are the flagship of dog farms. I think we're being targeted because we are the largest and it is a moral issue of dog breeding as a whole, rather than any actual animal welfare issues."

At ACA, Colin claims female dogs are restricted to two litters every 18 months, as the regulations require. Adult dogs are moved to a larger pen for four hours a day and those waiting to come into season are held in pens six times bigger than the minimum standard.

Greg Boland is the chief inspector at the RSPCA in Victoria. The animal welfare organisation destroys nearly 4000 dogs a year. The RSPCA argues that puppy farms simply add to the death toll, because there are too many animals already without a home.

"We'd rather see people buying their dogs from other establishments, rather than pet shops, because that's where impulse buying occurs," Greg said. "A nice, cute puppy that's bought as a Christmas present grows up into a big dog, or suddenly loses its cuteness."

"There's plenty of places out there where people can acquire dogs through vets, through reputable shelters, licensed breeders."

David Herman has moved to cash in on the change in public opinion. He operates Pets At Home, a pet shop that sources dumped animals from shelters.

"The results have been phenomenal," David said. "We had high expectations for the program, but because it was so different, no-one was quite sure how it was going to go."

"The results have been astounding. We're close on 2 months and have re-homed nearly 50 animals - dogs and cats. So rewarding."

The initial response from the public has been so successful, David is already planning to expand. "We are currently planning a roll-out commencing with a second store at the end of this month in Melbourne," David said.

"We are already looking at Sydney and Brisbane to roll out stores nationally, which we intend to do over the next couple of years," David said.

With puppy farms being established like never before, it seems there won't ever be any problem with supply.