

THE “PUPPY MILL” WARS How Colorado Won Its First Battle in the “Puppy Mill” Wars

Just like about ten other states, right after the holidays, Colorado found itself embroiled in its very first go round with animal rights (AR) groups. In a very short three weeks, we found ourselves going from rumors that HB 1172 was in the works, to standing before the Colorado House Committee assigned to do the first review of the bill. It was like going from 0 to 99 MPH in the blink of an eye. Yes, we won the first battle, but just by the hair on our chinny-chin-chin.

Colorado dog kennels are unique on several levels. There is only a hand full of dog breeders in Colorado, around 250, as compared to many other states. For the past 14 years we have been governed and regulated by the Pet Animal Care Facilities Act (PACFA), a good piece of legislation that has been emulated by any number of other states. Several glaringly bad animal abuse cases here in Colorado have driven public concern about animal welfare to a public outcry. To be sure, similar examples exist in most every state, not that the AR’s need any excuse to put us under their line of fire. In typical fashion, the AR’s brought in HB 1172 to target only dog breeding operations, the “puppy mills”. It totally ignored that there was equal if not greater abuse being identified at all levels of the pet industry here, not to mention at individual pet ownership levels as well. For a lot of good reasons, we had foolishly let the only state organization for dog breeders, Professional Licensed Dog Breeders of Colorado; self destruct, so when the call to arms came, it was a mad scramble.

How did we win? “If not for the courage of a fearless crew”, the battle would have been lost. We had to rally and draw up a game plan in one heck of a hurry. I could write a book about all the aspects of this bill, the arguments we used and or didn’t get a chance to use, and the game plans we sat up until late into the night and marched all over the state to organize. The Colorado Federation of Dog Clubs, helped at ground level and brought in their lobbyists to help fight on the hill. We had the support of both APRI and AKC not to mention the advice, help and support of many other national and state organizations and individuals outside the state. Out of the woodwork came the sporting dog groups and dog fanciers. It took a monumental effort by a lot of good people to get us in the clear again. By joining forces, we were able to bring this piece of bad legislation to a HALT!

As dog breeders, we find ourselves to be the victims on many levels:

First, we are victimized by the AR’s whose grist mill will chew up anyone who gets in the way of their radical agendas. Everyone wants a puppy, but no one wants to see the process that it takes to keep up with the public desire and demand to own one. As professional breeders everywhere struggle to offer the public with healthy, good quality, affordable puppies raised in humane conditions, we are taking a beating. How do professional breeders fight people who want to take away the right and ability of individual businesses to exist and thrive in a competitive market, free from unnecessary regulation? As it becomes more politically correct for individuals to hop on the band wagon of these AR groups, most people are being led like lambs to help the AR’s ultimate agenda. Little do they realize that their efforts may someday affect the rights of individuals to own any pet anywhere in the United States. There is an element out there that feels we should all be vegan, and that pet ownership is tantamount to

slavery. They want to make these judgments for us all, and use every means within their power to achieve their goals.

Second, we as dog breeders, along with the animal industry as a whole in Colorado, find ourselves with a broken system. We determined, and the House review committee seemingly agreed, that the PACFA basic design was sound and not in need of legislative changes of any kind, or at least not HB 1172. For some time, dog breeders in Colorado have been calling for more inspections and greater enforcement of the PACFA. Hopefully by reinforcing the self-funded PACFA with adequate staff and a new attitude, we will empower it to become proactive. PACFA has a tremendous job ahead of it to meet the growing public concern for animal welfare here in this state. We as the regulated community can no longer sit back and trust that everything is being taken care of. Everyone, from the hobbyists, AKC show kennels to the professional breeder are tainted by the existence of substandard kennels. We are going to have to support the system that regulates us all, or possibly see ourselves put out of business by the AR's and the public support they can generate.

Third, we as dog breeders are sometimes our own worst enemy. Unfortunately here in Colorado, what made a good kennel up until now was almost totally based upon the ethics of the persons involved. For those who can not measure up to good standards on their own, we need and must be able to rely on good systems designed to either make substandard kennels improve or take them out of business. Sometimes we, as dog breeders, may need to be a part of that system. We need to stop sweeping dirt under the rug at home or in our dog breeding communities. We need to admit to ourselves that we as dog breeders are not being targeted just because no one among us can raise a puppy well enough to suit the AR's. The public can not be lulled into looking the other way every time it buys a sick puppy or sees news at 9 with the latest "puppy mill" pictures. We need to clean up our act across the board, so we can all bear scrutiny to the light of day.

So, Colorado has dodged the bullet on the "puppy mill" wars for the moment, but we can not afford a rocking chair approach to the future. If for no other reason, this bill made us abundantly aware of the shortcomings we have here in Colorado. That old saying that we are only as good as our weakest link could never be truer than for everyone concerned in the pet industry. Sometimes we as dog breeders become so embroiled in being victimized by the AR's we forget we are concerned animal welfare citizens ourselves.

Here in Colorado we learned some invaluable lessons. AR's fight dirty and they fight hard. In the legislative process, we were not given a chance to rebuttal any of their accusations. They live in glass houses, and don't hesitate to throw stones, even though their own rescues, shelters, humane societies, etc. often don't have inspection reports any better than those among us they are supposedly so concerned about. Many of them also have had their doors shut due to animal neglect here in Colorado. The Colorado Attorney General has taken the Colorado Humane Society to court, and it isn't because they were being so "humane". Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is a radical animal rights group. Despite its name, it does not operate a single animal shelter, but exists only as a political organization. They all have seemingly endless budgets, concerns, and time is ever on their side, all the while patting themselves on the back that they unquestionably are in the right.

No doubt the AR's will be back at our door. Hopefully, we have learned from our mistakes, and will be better prepared to fight them when the next battle comes around, and it will. We felt the whole world watching, because based on how Colorado and other states treat the rights of a select group to dog ownership, is how the constitutional rights of individuals may be addressed in the future. Rest assured, we fight the good fight.