Proceedings of the Society for Theriogenology 2013 Annual Conference

Aug. 7-10, 2013 – Louisville, KY, USA

www.therio.org/

Next SFT Meeting:

Aug. 6-9, 2014 – Portland, OR, USA

Reprinted in the IVIS website with the permission of the Society for Theriogenology
Commercial dog breeding: implications for animal well-being
Candace C. Croney
Department of Animal Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN

Abstract
Commercial breeding of dogs is an emotionally laden, contentious and complex topic. Opposition to “puppy mills” appears to have increased in the past decade in the U.S., with a growing number of legislative initiatives aimed at regulating such operations. Concerns about dogs reared for commercial breeding purposes vary. However, they range from physical impingements on dog well-being as a function of their nutrition, genetics, housing, husbandry practices, reproductive and general health to behavioral wellness issues. Recent efforts to establish standards for humane care of commercially reared dogs have focused primarily on addressing sanitation and physical health issues. However, relatively little is offered in the way of mandating conditions that support behavioral well-being in these dogs, an oversight that is particularly problematic given that the intended purpose of the animals is for sale as companions. Behavioral problems in commercially reared dogs may stem from many of the same sources as the physical welfare issues (genetics, environment) and may manifest in undesirable behaviors such as excessive vocalization, anxiety and fearfulness, destructive behavior and aggression.

As efforts to regulate commercial dog breeding continue, there are likely to be increased opportunities for veterinary oversight of the care management and well-being of the animals. Improved incorporation of expertise in theriogenology, animal behavior and welfare will be essential to improving the quality of life experienced by dogs used for commercial breeding purposes.

Keywords: Animal welfare, dog breeding, behavior,

Introduction
Animal welfare is a highly contentious, complex component of contemporary food animal production which receives a significant amount of media coverage in the U.S. and abroad. Unsurprisingly, concerns about animal treatment extend to those used for other purposes, including for research, teaching, sport/entertainment and companionship. The commercial breeding of dogs, commonly referred to as “puppy mill” breeding, currently faces public scrutiny and sentiment not unlike that directed at intensive confinement farming of food animals. However, high volume confinement production of dogs is even more emotionally laden in part because of the cultural connotations associated with human-dog interactions in western developed nations, and because many people’s primary relationships with animals in such countries stem from frequent, positive interactions with companion animals. Given that over 36% of US households own dogs, commercial breeding of dogs, particularly under conditions that appear to harm them, evokes strong reactions by the U.S. public. Public perceptions of such operations tend to be highly negative although many people continue to purchase animals from uncertain origin (parking lots, for example) or from businesses known to source animals from commercial pet breeding operations. Little information exists relative to understanding the apparent discrepancies between public perceptions about commercial dog breeding and public purchasing and voting behavior relative to commercially bred dogs.

Commercial dog breeding is poorly received by many as it is often thought to exacerbate existing welfare problems associated with overpopulation of cats and dogs in shelters and rescues, thus contributing to already high rates of companion animal relinquishment, abandonment and euthanization, and the draining of financial resources of humane organizations. It is estimated that there are more than 78 million pet dogs in U.S.; of these, approximately four million are euthanized each year, with behavioral problems cited as the leading cause of relinquishment to shelters. Such problems are potentially worsened by flooding the market with animals that may or may not be successfully homed, or that may be returned due to physical or behavioral health problems. Consequently, scathing criticism of commercial dog breeding is common and has resulted in polarized, fractious debates, and ongoing attempts to alter, limit or entirely eliminate commercial dog breeding operations.
Understanding animal welfare in the context of commercial dog breeding

Although the term “animal welfare” carries multiple connotations for different people, it fundamentally pertains to value-laden notions about animal quality of life. According to Broom, welfare is the state of the animal in regards to its attempts to cope with the demands placed on it. Concerns about animal welfare are rooted in the belief that people have obligations to maintain an acceptable standard for the care and well-being of animals we maintain and utilize for different purposes. The challenge, of course, is to agree upon what that acceptable standard looks like. For some people, animal welfare is “just good husbandry,” in other words, it simply entails providing for animals’ basic needs for food, water, shelter and veterinary care. However, there is growing consensus that that for an animal to do well, both its physical and behavioral health must be addressed. In other words, animals must feel well, function well and whenever possible be permitted to exhibit natural behaviors commensurate with its adaptations. These conceptions are captured by the Five Freedoms, outlined by the Brambell Committee in the United Kingdom in 1965, which have now become the basis for many animal welfare initiatives in developed western nations. The Five Freedoms correspond to the three basic concepts of welfare. In essence, they are aimed at ensuring that farmed animals are not deprived of water and food and thus are not malnourished; they also promote the idea that animal health is crucial--animal should be free from preventable diseases, injury and functional impairment. Further they encode the notion of animals having behavioral needs which are critical to their well-being. Thus, they should not have their behavior restricted without good justification and also should not experience unnecessary mental suffering.

Different stakeholders, though, may disagree in their prioritization of these dimensions of animal welfare. For example, a dog breeder who emphasizes the physical aspects of well-being may focus primarily on ensuring freedom from malnourishment and from preventable disease and injury, whereas an applied ethologist may consider the capacity of animals to behave normally to be of utmost importance. Regardless of which conception of welfare is chosen or which criteria are prioritized, the challenge for commercial dog breeders is to clearly articulate and demonstrate that their animals are maintained according to standards that permit them to retain a social license to operate.

Regulation of “puppy mills”

In the past decade, attempts to regulate commercial dog breeding operations have increased dramatically. While the Animal Welfare Act has mandated standards for the care of dogs and cats other kinds of breed for commercial sale since 1966, breeders who directly to the public are not covered, increasing the risks that animals can be maintained in subpar conditions in puppy mills with little protection other than that offered by state anti-cruelty statutes. However, compounding this issue is the problem of defining such an operation in the first place. There is little consensus on whether a “puppy mill” is created as a function of the number of animals maintained for breeding, the total number of animals maintained, the number of litters produced annually, or as a function of the living conditions, management and quality of care provided to the animals. For example, in 2008, Virginia’s House Bill 538 defined a commercial breeder as “a person who, during any 12-month period, maintains 30 or more adult female dogs for the primary purpose of the sale of their offspring as companion animals.” However, initially the number of animals proposed was lower (20 adult females) and this number varies across states with established standards. Further, localities are permitted to adopt ordinances allowing more dogs. Moreover, state standards for the humane care of dogs categorized as coming from a commercial breeding operation vary widely, with some states establishing requirements for housing, sanitation, nutrition and veterinary care, while others do not clearly specify standards in these areas. Few if any, appear to mandate conditions relative to behavioral well-being of the animals.

Welfare issues associated with commercial breeding implications for theriogenology

As is the case for food animal production today, a number of welfare issues can be encountered in commercial dog breeding that influences animals’ physical and behavioral well-being. These relate to the quality of housing provided to the animals, including space allocation, flooring, lighting, temperature,
ventilation and air quality. In addition, the quality of nutrition and veterinary care provided are important factors. Criteria for, timeliness and method(s) of euthanization must also be considered.

The reproductive management of the animals is a key consideration and an area of major criticism for opponents of such breeding operations. Concerns here include breeding of dogs without due consideration for the criteria on which animals are selected to reproduce (beyond aesthetics) and without sufficient expertise to support, evaluate and document the reproductive and overall health of individual animals and with consideration for different breeds. In addition, expertise is needed to determine appropriate ages for breeding animals, and the number and quality of litters that can reasonably be expected to be produced in a given time frame without undue physical distress and deterioration to the breeding animals and their offspring. Appropriate and timely intervention schemes must also be derived that better reflect current scientific discoveries in theriogenology.

Initial attempts to improve animal well-being relative to reproductive health can be noted in several of the provisions under existing “puppy mill bills” that have been passed and those currently being proposed. For example, VA’s HB 538 requires “annual certification by a licensed veterinarian that the dog is in suitable health for breeding” and limits the age at which dogs can be bred.7 As similar legislation continues to be proposed and passed in other states it is likely that increased demand for veterinarians, particularly those specializing in theriogenology, will be created by breeders attempting to come into compliance.

The behavioral well-being of commercially bred dogs can be equally problematic, and as noted earlier, is often entirely overlooked or minimally attended to in established standards. Appropriate genetic selection of animals that can tolerate commercial rearing conditions is rarely discussed.9 Likewise, selection of breeding animals that are behaviorally sound is insufficiently discussed. Since the leading cause of pet animal relinquishment is behavioral problems, it is both ethically and scientifically problematic to breed and commercially distribute dogs at risk for or currently exhibiting behavioral abnormalities given that the intention is for these animals is to live harmoniously with people for the duration of their lives. Further, there is high propensity for suffering if animals maintained for commercial breeding do not receive adequate attention to their needs for enrichment, normal social interactions with conspecifics, positive human-animal interactions, appropriate socialization and sufficient exercise.

Failure to ensure that these criteria are met can potentially place dogs result in unpleasant states such as boredom, frustration and chronic arousal/distress.10 Studies on the life-long physical and behavioral impairments of animals experiencing distress in utero and improper or undue neonatal stress provide strong impetus to scrutinize commercial breeding operations in regard to care and management practices that may result in maternal stress in breeding bitches that in turn negatively impacts puppies via chronic activation of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis.11 Impaired learning, chronic arousal and increased sensitivity to stress-inducing stimuli that manifests in fearfulness and aggression to people and other animals are likely to be poorly tolerated by dog owners. Other problematic behaviors that may be facilitated by improper genetic selection and environmental management of commercially bred dogs include excessive vocalization, house soiling, and destructive behaviors.

Dogs that are not carefully genetically selected and managed are therefore at heightened risk for mistreatment, relinquishment, abandonment or euthanasia. High volume commercial breeding operations that produce animals that are behaviorally unsound are likely to face continued public ire, increased regulation and further deterioration of their social license to operate.

As efforts to regulate commercial dog breeding continue, there are likely to be increased opportunities for veterinary oversight of the care management and well-being of the animals. In absence of societal consensus on whether commercial breeding of dogs should occur at all, better incorporation of expertise in theriogenology, animal behavior and welfare is essential to improving the quality of life experienced by dogs currently used for commercial breeding purposes.

References