

## **Sunday Column – That Doggy in the Window**

### **For publication 7.16.17**

According to statistics published by the American Pet Products Association, gross sales of pet related products and services for 2017 are estimated to come in close to \$70 billion by year-end. Pet products are big business. In fact, sales growth eclipsed that of the cosmetics industry in 2013.

Of this \$70 billion, 23% will be spent on veterinary medicine and 8% on services such as boarding and grooming. The remaining 69%, or \$48 billion, will be spent on retail products, which includes live animals. These numbers are not to be trifled with and the PIJAC, or Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, is on the job protecting every red cent there is to be made from consumers.

The retail sale of live animals, including fish, parakeets, ferrets, mice, reptiles, kittens and puppies accounts for a paltry \$2 billion, or 2.8% of total annual gross revenue. The breeding and distribution of live animals for retail sale is a cruel business, regardless of what kind of animal is being produced. However, what many of us find particularly exploitative is the mass breeding of puppies. One doesn't have to dig too deep to find articles and videos describing in agonizing detail just what this looks like.

In 2014, officials in northwest Georgia's Cherokee County seized 357 dogs and puppies from the inaptly named, "Heavenly Kennels." The 63 year old owner wasted no time pleading guilty in exchange for 25 years' probation which we can only hope included a prohibition from ever owning another pet.

Another, more recent case, occurred this past April in Habersham County, Georgia. Over 350 animals were found living in "deplorable conditions" and "in need of urgent veterinary care" according to a local news report. The site was operating primarily as a puppy mill but the rescue operation also picked up donkeys, pigs, chickens and a horse.

The Petland chain is one of the last holdouts to include the retail sale of puppies as its primary product offering. Petco and PetSmart, the two largest pet store chains, listened to constituents years ago. Today they host adoption events for animal welfare organizations and provide grants out of their charitable foundations to help the 6 million unwanted dogs and cats entering our nation's shelters each year.

Joe Watson, president of Petland, was interviewed for a 2016 article published in the trade journal, "Pet Business". He believes the pet industry has a "serious sustainability problem" due to pressure from animal rights groups which he claims has led to a serious decline in pet breeding.

To protect its business model Petland prevailed upon PIJAC lobbyists to push special interest legislation in the state of Georgia during the 2017 session. The "pre-emption" bill would have

prohibited local governments from restricting the retail sale of puppies. When it failed to pass they attempted to hijack 3 other bills but fortunately were unsuccessful. They will be back in 2018 and we will be ready for them.

Cities and counties all over the United States have passed ordinances to restrict puppy sales within their jurisdictions. This is not because they are against capitalism. It is because the source of retail puppies is puppy mills. If the moral issue doesn't get to you, consider what it costs taxpayers when local governments have to shut down one of these atrocities.

The Petland business model is outdated in a civilized America. Those of us in the business of looking out for animals will watch these bills and we'll alert our legislators when they come up. However, at the end of the day it is up to the consumer. As long as people continue to purchase puppies from retail outlets these stores will thrive and so will the estimated 10,000 puppy mills operating throughout the U.S.

*Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at [byeo@pawshumane.org](mailto:byeo@pawshumane.org) with your comments and story ideas.*