Questions and Answers: Regulation of Dog and Cat Breeders and Dealers

Q. Who regulates commercial dog/cat breeders?
A. Facilities that breed and sell their animals to pet stores, brokers, or research facilities are covered under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The facility operators are required to obtain a license from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). APHIS inspectors from the Animal Care program conduct unannounced compliance inspections to ensure that the animals receive humane care and treatment. Many States and local governments also have their own laws that protect animals. Breeders and dealers also have to comply with these laws.

Q. What types of dog/cat breeders and dealers does the USDA regulate? Which breeders and dealers are not regulated under the AWA?
A. The AWA requires people who breed dogs and cats for use as pets or for other purposes and sell them at the wholesale level and the wholesale dealers who supply these animals to pet stores, brokers, or research facilities to be licensed with APHIS. While the AWA protects many dogs and cats, it does not cover all animals in all situations. Some dogs and cats sold by pet stores or directly to the public, as well as those kept as pets by individuals or housed in shelters or pounds, are not covered by the Act. APHIS’ jurisdiction is limited to the authority granted by the AWA. As indicated previously, States and local governments may create and enforce their own laws that protect animals, which may exceed the AWA standards.

Q. How do facilities become licensed?
A. In order to engage in regulated activities, the dog/cat breeder or dealer must first apply for an AWA license from APHIS. Before receiving an AWA license, the applicant must pass a complete, prelicensing inspection of the prospective animal facility and be in full compliance with all of the AWA standards and regulations. If the facility is in full compliance with the Act, the applicant will be qualified for licensure and will be mailed the appropriate paperwork, including the application, to complete and submit along with the licensing fees.

Q. What is APHIS’ role regarding the commercial transport of animals?
A. APHIS enforces specific regulations and standards governing the transport of animals by commercial carriers. These rules help ensure that licensed dealers,
contract carriers, and intermediate handlers treat regulated animals humanely. Transported animals must meet established minimum age and health certification requirements. They must be housed in safe, sound containers with adequate space and ventilation and be provided with protection from extreme temperatures. Animals arriving at a terminal must be promptly picked up and must receive proper care until they are retrieved by the receiving party. The 2008 Farm Bill amended the AWA by adding the requirement that dogs imported into the United States for the purpose of resale must be in good health, vaccinated, and at least 6 months of age.

Q. Why and under what circumstances does APHIS confiscate animals?
A. If APHIS has evidence of animals suffering in a regulated facility, a notice of intent to confiscate is given to the facility. If the facility fails to remedy the situation in a short period of time, authorization is obtained from the APHIS Administrator to confiscate the animals. In some cases, APHIS negotiates with a facility to surrender the animals directly to an outside organization to simplify the process and expedite placement of the animals.

Q. How does APHIS address AWA violations?
A. If an inspection reveals deficiencies in meeting AWA standards, the inspector documents them and instructs the licensee to correct the problems within a given timeframe. If deficiencies remain uncorrected, APHIS considers enforcement action. If deficiencies remain uncorrected at subsequent inspections, APHIS considers legal action. Repeat noncompliances and serious incidents may warrant enforcement actions, such as letters of warning, monetary penalties, cease-and-desist orders, license suspensions or revocations, and confiscation of animals.

Q. Can an AWA violation ever be a criminal offense?
A. Violations of certain sections of the AWA are only pursued as criminal charges, such as those related to animal fighting. Others may include fraudulent records pertaining to the acquisition and disposition of animals. In these cases, the USDA Office of the Inspector General usually conducts investigations, and the U.S. Department of Justice prosecutes them. These cases are not overseen by USDA administrative law judges. Outcomes in criminal cases may include a prison sentence and/or fines.

Additional Information
For more specific information about the AWA and its regulations and standards, visit the APHIS Animal Care Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare and select “View the Animal Welfare Act and Regulations” on the lower right side of the page.

Contact information for the Animal Care regional and headquarters offices is listed below.

Eastern Region
Animal Care, APHIS-USDA
920 Main Campus Drive, Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27606-5210
Phone: (919) 716-5532
Fax: (919) 716-5696
Email: aceast@aphis.usda.gov

Western Region
Animal Care, APHIS-USDA
Building B, Mailstop #3W11
2150 Centre Avenue
Fort Collins, CO 80526-8117
Phone: (970) 494-7478
Fax: (970) 494-7461
Email: acwest@aphis.usda.gov

Headquarters
Animal Care, APHIS-USDA
4700 River Road, Unit 84
Riverdale, MD 20737-1234
Phone: (301) 851-3751
Fax: (301) 734-4978
Email: ace@aphis.usda.gov

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