To Market, to
Market, to Buy a Sick Dog

An HSUS investigation reveals the underbelly of Texas puppy sales

BY M. CARRIE ALLAN

DUST SWIRLS AT OUR FEET AS WE WALK row after row at the sweltering Canton, Texas, flea market, visiting shacks and stalls and little trailers where scores of people—ranging from families to professional breeders who’ve traveled hundreds of miles—are selling dogs.

While the rusted metal sign above one entrance to the animal market here reads “Dog Town,” there are enough other species to help Noah meet his quota: chickens, goats, rodents, sugar gliders, ducks, even a llama and a few donkeys. It’s hard to tell which animals are here to be sold for meat or eggs and which are meant to be pets. Exotic birds are jammed into cages by the dozen. Rabbits pant in their crowded pens, barely moving in the heat. The claws of chickens scrabble frantically at the wire under their feet. In a few pens, multiple species are housed together, piglets piled up with puppies. Behind one little shack, lying in the dust, pants an old, wheezy bloodhound, his eyes dripping a thick yellow pus.
For an environment so packed with dogs, it is troublingly quiet. There is little barking. Scores of dachshunds and Labs and pit bulls and dozens of little Yorkies and shih tzus doze fitfully in pens. In the outdoor stalls, the dogs are sleepy or lethargic, doing what they can to stay cool. The air is ripe with the smell of animals and their feces. In some stalls, fans push the hot air around and misters coat the area and visitors with a thin layer of moisture. Hand sanitizer bottles are all over the area, with notes reading, “DON’T TOUCH THE PUPPIES” and “HELP US FIGHT PARVO.”

As the editor of Animal Sheltering, The HSUS’s magazine for shelters and rescues, I know about parvo. It’s a killer disease, highly contagious and particularly lethal to puppies, passed between animals through contact with feces—even a speck on fur. Without proper vaccination and disinfection, it can decimate whole populations of dogs, causing them to break with fever, vomiting, bloody diarrhea. Animal shelters fear it, construct careful cleaning and disinfection protocols to prevent it, fight it with bleach and quarantines that don’t always work—and that’s in facilities whose walls and floors are designed for effective disinfection.

As we walk around Canton, I start mentally tallying the parvo risk factors: the high density of young animals. Unclear vaccination status. Dogs and puppies napping in old, rusted cages, their rough chips and scaling a great hiding place for cunning, invisible viruses to lie in wait. Dogs and puppies lying on old tarps or sometimes directly on the ground, where parvo can lurk quietly for years. Visitors moving from stall to stall, touching—in spite of the signs—puppy after puppy, their hands carrying anything from one puppy’s mouth or fur into the cage of the next. After 10 minutes, I no longer feel relief when one of the misters hits me with its spray. I don’t want to be sprayed with anything from this place. I make a mental note to leave my shoes in Texas so as not to track anything home to my own dog.

I’m joined on my walk-through by a member of the HSUS investigations team and Melanie Kahn, senior director of The HSUS’s Stop Puppy Mills Campaign. Kahn and her staff have been keeping an eye on flea markets. They know puppy mills—mass breeding facilities where mother dogs and their puppies suffer from lack of veterinary care and socialization—are already selling at such venues. And they are concerned that flea markets may now come roaring to the forefront as a major outlet for puppy mill sales. It’s a possibility in light of a recent federal regulation that, while creating some important protections for puppies sold over the Internet, unfortunately exempts direct in-person sales in venues such as flea markets. The investigative work the team has done has already shown that Texas pet stores, in addition to buying directly from breeders with Animal Welfare Act violations and from brokers who work with puppy mills, are also buying dogs from this market here in Canton—and many large-scale breeders come to sell here.

And it’s not just a Texas thing. “To give you an idea, we thought flea market puppy sales were confined to the southern parts of the
country,” Kahn tells me later. “But when we asked some of our advocates on Facebook, ‘Are there flea markets near you that sell puppies?’, we got people from all over the country saying yes.”

Still early in its research, the campaign already has reports of at least 80 flea markets selling puppies around the country. While customers may assume that the sellers at a flea market are local, at Canton alone, documents obtained by The HSUS showed 400 puppies shipped in from other states over the past 18 months, says Kathleen Summers, director of outreach and research for the Stop Puppy Mills Campaign. “We’re talking hundreds of animals shipped just into Texas—thousands nationally,” she says.

The list advocates provided is heavy on southern states: Georgia. South Carolina. Mississippi. Many advocates mentioned the market here in Canton and its nasty conditions. But the list drifts north: Illinois. Wisconsin. Michigan. Many advocates wrote of seeing dogs like the ones we see here: animals who look sick, animals so lethargic they seem drugged. In 2008 in Toronto, a border collie puppy sold at a flea market later died of rabies, compelling the public health department to launch a search for everyone who might have come in contact with the animal, and warn the public to only get animals from reputable sources.

Among the puppy purveyors at Canton is a woman in a folding chair under a patch of shade in the sun-sweltered heat. She smiles up at us, a half dozen puppies tussling in the dry grass of the wire pen next to her. She’s wearing a pink T-shirt and a pink sequined ball cap, and her display area is accented with pink ribbons and cute pictures of English bulldogs. She’s 30ish and blonde, and she shares a certain roly-poly quality with the dogs she’s selling—a business so lucrative, she tells us, that she no longer has to hold a job and can instead stay home with her kids.

Kahn coos over the puppies in the pen. “Will these puppies get along with my dog?” she asks the seller innocently, and the woman assures her they will. What’s more, she advises eagerly, if we buy a female bulldog, we should really consider breeding her. “I make so much money off every puppy,” she says, nodding her head enthusiastically at our expressions of surprise. “Really! You should try it!”

Kahn looks at the puppies panting in the little pen and says it’s too bad that there’s no female available.

The woman, realizing that she’s talked up stock she doesn’t have on hand, makes it clear that gender is no barrier to potential cash flow: “I earn $200 per stud fee for my boy,” she says. “It’s really easy.”

But isn’t breeding difficult? we ask. Don’t you have to know what you’re doing? Especially with English bulldogs—a breed that, she acknowledges nonchalantly, has to be born by Caesarean section?

She shrugs: no big deal. Breeding bulldogs, it seems, is something that anyone could do to make some extra cash.

And judging by the number of sellers at Canton today, offering pups of every breed from rottweilers to shih tzus in a setting that looks like a dirty yard sale set up in a squatters’ village, her bulldogs are the tip of the iceberg.
If we were here under different circumstances, we might challenge the bulldog breeder on her claims. We might point out that an hour away in Dallas, the animal shelter is overflowing with dogs, and that many shelters around Texas still euthanize dogs due to the number streaming in. We might question the idea that breeding bulldogs, who are notorious for their hereditary health issues, is something anyone should take up lightly. We’d ask her about that amazing income stream: Most responsible, small-scale dog breeders agree that the business is not particularly profitable. The expenses of providing good medical care for the mother and pups, of feeding, of vaccinations and health tests, cut hugely into revenue. We’d ask her about another key responsibility of reputable breeders: Will she take back a puppy who turns out to be sick or support a buyer whose pup has behavior or health problems later on?

But my two colleagues, of course, aren’t really shopping for puppies. They’re here in Texas checking out venues where puppies are sold, visiting flea markets and pet stores to see how the animals are kept, how busy the venues are, and what they can find out about where the dogs come from. They’re shooting video at the sites we visit, with plans to use the footage to show consumers that purchasing from such outlets can inadvertently bolster puppy mills.

Kahn and our investigator will visit pet stores and flea markets in most of the major metropolitan areas in Texas. They have documentation of places for which The HSUS has received consumer complaints—someone purchased an animal who was sick or saw inhumane conditions when they visited—or where, records show, the retailer is getting puppies from large-scale, out-of-state breeders. Over the course of several trips to cities all around Texas, they’ll see hundreds of puppies. And they’ll be told dozens of stories about where they come from.

On this leg of the investigation, checking out outlets around Dallas, we cover hundreds of miles in the course of a few days. We agree on our story, in case we have to make casual chitchat with the staff of the places we visit: We’re friends, taking the day off to find Kahn a new puppy. We don’t know much, but one of our friends did buy a pet store puppy who got sick and turned out to be from a puppy mill, and we don’t want to make the same mistake.

A routine falls into place as we go from one store to the next: Kahn hones in on one or two puppies. The salespeople get the dogs out of their cages so we can meet them. Laying the bubbliness on thick, Kahn coos over each one in turn, warbling about how much her boyfriend will love him, making it clear: She wants this one so bad.

Eagerly, the salespeople talk up the dogs: They have papers. They have shots. Kahn can take one home today.

At this point, our investigator asks some more questions. We’ve heard stories about puppy mills. I just want to make sure we’re getting a dog from somewhere good. Can we see the dog’s papers? Do you know the name of the breeder, so we can do a little more research online and make sure it’s a good place?

The responses vary. Some salespeople offer the papers, but when
HE HUMANE MOVEMENT has long worked to increase public awareness about puppy mills. And it’s been effective: Many people now know that when you buy a dog from a pet store, you can’t be sure where the animal was born or how healthy and socialized he is. Phrases like “AKC-registered” and “USDA-inspected” can still confuse less-knowledgeable customers. Just as “organic” doesn’t mean “humane” when it comes to animal-based food products, “AKC-registered” indicates nothing beyond an animal’s genealogy. Sadly, neither does “USDA-inspected” hold the weight it should; while the agency does conduct inspections of breeders, it is overburdened and check-ins happen far less frequently than needed.

But puppies acquired at pet stores are only part of the picture. With public awareness growing over the past decade, mass breeders have been exploiting a loophole in federal regulations: Those breeders who categorized themselves as retail pet stores, selling dogs directly to the public, were not required to be licensed in a way that would subject them to USDA inspections—unlike large-scale breeders selling puppies to pet stores.

The thin logic behind this discrepancy: Ostensibly, someone who bought a dog from a retail pet store would see the animal prior to purchase and be able to judge his health and behavior, providing the consumer with a modicum of protection. But by defining herself as a retail pet store, a breeder could then opt to conduct her business entirely via the Internet, phone, and mail—eliminating the small protection the consumer might get from meeting a dog before buying him.

Mass breeders exploited the disparity, putting a new spin on the famous New Yorker cartoon: On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a puppy mill. Using idyllic photographs and deceptive language to depict their facilities as beautiful fields in the country and their puppies as healthy and behaviorally sound, mass breeders marketed, sold, and shipped puppies—many of them sick and traumatized from their bad beginnings—to consumers around the country.

Over the years, The HSUS has collected hundreds of complaints from people who have bought puppies online and been shocked when they arrived sick or otherwise compromised. Some of these stories are haunting: families who expected a healthy, happy new canine member and instead got a terrified and sickly animal who cost thousands in vet bills—and in some cases soon died.

The HSUS and its allies have argued for years that the retail loophole was fundamentally unfair and that those involved in the business of breeding dogs for profit should all face similar regulatory standards. And in September, the USDA finally closed the loophole and will be extending federal oversight to the thousands of breeders who sell large numbers of puppies and kittens sight-unseen, whether online or via mail or phone. The new rules dictate that such breeders must allow potential buyers to first see the animals in person. They can either do that—or obtain a license, which would subject them to the same inspections as breeders selling to pet stores.

It was a huge victory for thousands of dogs, and for the organizations and advocates who have fought for the change.

And yet battling puppy mills often seems like battling a Hydra—
you cut off one line of profits, and two more appear, ready to pick up the slack. In this case, the change in regulation addressed the Internet sales issue but did not fix the more fundamental inequality: The exemption for breeders making in-person sales—for example, at flea markets—is still in place.

Some pet stores have stopped selling puppies after pressure from their customers, and Summers points out that several states have already passed laws addressing flea market or roadside sales. “Texas has a few jurisdictions that regulate it, but we think they should consider a statewide ban.”

The human-animal bond is fundamental, and thousands of years old. Of all animals, none have a history that tracks our own as closely as dogs, who have evolved along with us, creeping up to our campfire, ingratiating themselves into our circle, accompanying us on hunts—becoming, over the course of centuries, our protectors and silent confidants and family members. They have adapted to us, making the long evolutionary journey from howling in the forests outside our caves to dozing at the foot of our beds.

So when puppy mills are breeding sick, behaviorally unsound animals, where should someone go to find a dog? After all, gone are the days when humans might acquire a canine companion when a curious local wolf started wondering if the scraps near that people-camp might be better than chasing deer.

In his book The Bond: Our Kinship with Animals, Our Call to Defend Them, HSUS president and CEO Wayne Pacelle gets at one of the core issues challenging the humane movement: If we rid the world of inhumane economic practices—be it puppy mills, whaling, the Canadian seal hunt—what will replace them? People need to make a living. Think of that young mother at the Canton flea market, happily staying home with her kids thanks to sales of her bulldog puppies. How hard would it be to persuade her to do something else?

Merely arguing for destruction of one system is not enough. We have to be creative enough to envision and build the world we want to put in its place. What, Pacelle asks, are the business models that could achieve good outcomes for animals while adding economic value and sustaining jobs?

Polly’s Pet Shop, a small family-run pet store with two locations in the suburbs of San Antonio, provides one example. Polly’s has been in business for 37 years, and manager Steven Vaughan says the family—which he married into—always wanted the business to be different. “We never wanted to be part of that connotation that all pet stores have puppy mill puppies,” he says. “We tried to get away from that as much as we could.” The store hasn’t worked with breeders or brokers for as long as Vaughan can remember; he recalls hanging up the phone on puppy brokers who have called the store.

In the past, they’ve sold puppies they’ve gotten from local people whose animals had unexpected litters, but in September, thanks to an assist from John Moyer, outreach coordinator for the Stop Puppy Mills Campaign, Polly’s went a step further. Every two weeks or so, Vaughan’s mom makes a stop at two local animal shelters—San Antonio Animal Care Services and the Humane Society of the New Braunfels Area—and gets homeless puppies from them instead. The dogs are vaccinated and neutered before they even arrive at the pet store.

As of October, Polly’s had adopted out 55 puppies. No, the business isn’t making as much money on puppy sales, but Vaughan says he feels it doesn’t matter: “It’s better for the animal, and from our standpoint it’s a good PR thing,” he says. The store has gotten lots of feedback from customers about how happy they are with the transition, and he says the staff of Polly’s two stores—the majority of them young high school and college students—have been really excited to explain the transition to customers. What’s more, the people who come to adopt puppies now seem to be more willing to spend a little more on higher quality supplies to care for them, he says. He can’t
quite explain why: “Maybe the clientele that comes looking for an adoption puppy is going to be more likely to spoil it?”

Not everyone has an option like Polly’s nearby, but responsible, caring breeders can also be a good place to look for a puppy. And then there are the millions of animals at shelters and rescues. In October, HSUS staff called 24 animal shelters in the areas around the puppy-selling venues we visited and found more than 420 puppies in need of homes. Given those numbers, Polly’s business ethic seems like a particularly bright light in the often unhappy world of Texas puppy sales. Listening to Vaughan talk, I think again of The Bond: “For our cause to succeed,” Pacelle writes, “we have to carry the day with our moral and legal arguments, but also every workday show that business can succeed and also be good to animals.”

IMAGINE THOSE YOUNG KIDS working at Polly’s and how they must feel about their jobs these days. Imagine them, especially, in contrast to the kids we met at other places we visited.

Fresh-faced and awkwardly eager, some slightly shy, most of them were teenagers, working high school or summer jobs. They reminded me of my college days when I often took study breaks at a local pet store. I would walk up and down the rows, staring in at the basset’s long ears and soulful eyes or laughing at the Pomeranian’s leaping, and feel the stress roll off me.

I had no idea, then, the world of miserable breeding mothers who were likely behind those dogs. Recalling my own ignorance makes me feel waves of sympathy for the kids working in these stores, who, I imagine, probably felt lucky to get such a cool summer job. Playing with puppies all day—what could be better?

It wasn’t until I came to work at The HSUS that I comprehended the source of many of those animals. I remember a puppy mill raid where the owner had gotten wind of the bust and the rescue teams went in to find some dogs still in their kennels, but a large mound of sawdust over animals the breeder had hastily buried. I remember the green slime underneath the dogs’ cages, the rusted wire under their sore feet, and, most of all, their terror as rescuers crawled into their runs to pull them to safety.

Once you know, you can’t unknow. It spoils the pleasure of going to stores that sell pets.

Months after tagging along with Kahn and our investigator in Texas, I think about those young salespeople. Many of them, when asked for breeder details, didn’t know—but said that their boss would. They would be happy to call him and get the info, then call Kahn back so she would be more comfortable buying the puppy. Many of them were clearly excited to be making a sale and thought getting this information would be no problem.

With these kids, the results were universal: Either they called back, bewildered and apologetic, explaining that they asked and found they couldn’t share that information after all—or they never called. Not a single one called back with details confirming the local, small-scale, quality breeders they claimed provided their animals.

Months after Texas, I still think about some of the sickly, trembling puppies we saw, and about those kids. I wonder if they went home in the evening and thought about the interaction they’d had with their supervisors. I wonder if they told their parents, “Hey, Mom, something weird happened at work today….” What could it mean that their boss wouldn’t reveal that information to customers? Why wouldn’t he? If there was nothing to hide, what harm could it do? Didn’t he want to make the sale?

I wonder if we planted those first seeds of doubt—if they, too, may soon start looking for a better way.

ON THE IPAD and at humanesociety.org: Watch a video from the Texas investigation.