LOCATION: Cottonwood, Alabama
ANIMALS SAVED: 63 Dogo Argentinos, two French bulldogs and one German shepherd

IT WAS A TENSE SITUATION, working in the middle of a cornfield with one officer standing guard. A black truck suddenly barreled down the driveway. In true COPS fashion, the officer pointed his rifle at the truck, yelling, “STOP!”

Everyone went for cover.

The driver inched out of the truck, lay on the ground and was handcuffed.

Without batting a collective eye, HSUS rescuers and volunteers picked up where they’d left off that mid-January day, scooping up dogs so skinny each bone showed in their tails.

The HSUS became aware of the breeding operation when the Cottonwood Police Department called about dogs being bred for hog-dog fights. Pitting dogs against feral hogs became illegal in Alabama in 2005, but the practice has since gone underground. The investigation took an urgent turn when officers discovered dozens of starving Dogo Argentinos.

Dogs were scattered throughout the property, with no food or water and little to no cover. “Being that underweight made the cold weather intolerable,” says Chris Schindler, HSUS manager of animal fighting investigations.

Only a few dogs had protection from the elements, like several who had crawled inside a dilapidated car, a lame French bulldog in the man’s home and nine puppies in an enclosed porch. Rescuers fished the puppies out one at a time. While waiting for a vet, the runt snuggled under Schindler’s beard.

At the temporary shelter, the dogs were given medical care and placed on a high-calorie diet.

The elderly bulldog, nicknamed Murray, showed improvement with the new food and pain and heart medications. A few weeks later, as HSUS field rescuer Jennifer Kulina-Lanese cleaned spilled water from his bowl, Murray tried to play. “Tears welled up in my eyes,” she says, because he actually felt well enough for his personality to emerge. “He knew love.”