

Who can say no to puppy kisses? It's the rare person who does not melt when confronted with a darling puppy full of funny energy. But it is also the rare person who stops to think about the origin of that puppy. It would surprise most people to learn that there is a huge commercial kennel industry in the United States that mass produces puppies and ships them to pet stores.

The numbers are truly staggering - there are hundreds of thousands of "breeder dogs" caged in kennels being bred over and over. Many kennels have hundreds even thousands of breeder dogs caged at their facilities. One company alone had over 26 million dollars in sales in 2002.

The conditions at these kennels are often horrific - with seriously ill dogs living in filth trapped in small wire cages being bred time after time until their little bodies wear out and they either die or they are killed because they fail to produce. Anyone who has ever visited one of these kennels will most certainly be haunted by the images, and by the little squeaking sounds coming from dogs who have been debarked - sometimes by having a metal rod rammed down their throats to rupture their vocal cords.

Stories abound from people who have purchased dogs from pet store only to discover that their new puppy is seriously ill. Studies by the Center of Disease Control and the State of California have shown that 50% of the puppies in pet stores are incubating disease. This does not include the numbers of dogs who have genetic conditions that were not yet obvious. One Australian Shepherd sold to a Missouri pet store by a large puppy broker had hip dysplasia so severe that she hopped like a clumsy bunny. She watched mournfully as the other puppies played and struggled to keep up with them but could not. The surgery to repair her hips cost over five thousand dollars and required weeks of recovery.

Kennels, brokers and pet stores are fond of saying that the kennels are licensed and inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture implying that this offers some level of assurance of quality. The USDA is tasked with enforcing the Animal Welfare Act which is intended to promote a very minimum standard of care for the dogs in kennels. The USDA through it's Rural Development Loan program gave at least 3.5 million dollars in loans to one of the largest puppy brokers in the country - the same one with 26 million dollars in sales in 2002. This is clearly a conflict of interest.

USDA representatives have stated on several occasions that the Agency chooses to rely on encouragement and education with the kennels to gain compliance with the regulations rather than enforcement and citations. This view is also stated in the USDA policy manual. If you knew that the police would never give you a ticket for speeding what would your incentive be to follow the speed limit? Stated differently, would you want to eat at a restaurant where the health inspector only gave warnings and never fines for unclean conditions. Encouragement works well for puppy training and toddlers but not for regulatory compliance. The USDA'S failure to enforce the provisions of the AWA not only harm the people who buy sick puppies but more significantly leave thousands of breeder dogs in misery.

The only way to be sure that the puppy you buy did not come from a commercial kennel with horrific conditions is by seeing the parents. Don't believe the pet store owner who says the puppies were raised in a "loving home in the Midwest". You need to see the parents and the conditions where they live.

Even better than buying a new puppy is rescuing a dog from a shelter or a rescue organization. Millions of dogs are killed in this country every year. The mass production of puppies is morally and ethically reprehensible puppies when there is a mass slaughter of perfectly wonderful dogs. Pet stores contribute to the mass slaughter because they cater to the impulse purchase. One Petland in Bradenton Florida even brags that it gives it's employees a special bonus every time they sell a puppy. Adding a dog to a family is a fifteen year commitment and should not be treated like it's nothing more than buying a pair of shoes. Many of these impulse purchases end up in already over burdened shelters.

Those little puppies in the pet stores are darling and irresistible. To help you resist them put the picture in your head of their parents in a cage, out in the freezing cold, covered with filth, and profoundly dejected. Dogs are our companions and very best friends. Please be their best friends. Don't contribute to the mass production of puppies. Just say no to that puppy in the window.