



Farming subsidies

The KC says it condemns puppy farming. So why does it take money from puppy farmers and register their pups?

When I have deadlines looming, a little bit of displacement activity is always in order. One of these is suddenly realising that the light-switch surrounds need cleaning. Another is prowling the pro-showdog forums to see what's on their minds.

This is partly because it's sometimes me that's causing them to spit venom, and the subject they return to again and again is the subject of puppy farms - and, particularly, how unfair it was that our film *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* hauled 'responsible' breeders over the coals and totally ignored puppy farms and the backyard breeders.

Here's one fairly typical challenge: "So, Jemima Harrison, I'm throwing down the gauntlet at you - make your next production on *Puppy Farms Exposed* and see if you can regain any of the respect you have lost from genuine, passionate dog owners/showers. After all, your company is called Passionate Productions, is it not? I'll be waiting to hear of this in production, but I'll not be holding my breath!"

Good job, too. I don't want to be responsible for anyone's untimely death.

As it happens, we'd love to make a film about puppy farms if anyone would commission us. The conditions in which some puppies are raised - and particularly the plight of breeding bitches - breaks my heart. But until the moment the BBC or another broadcaster hands over the dosh, I can certainly tackle the issue here.

September 19 is Puppy Farm Awareness Day, a brilliant idea initiated by Puppy Love, Hope UK and Puppy Alert, but which many other dog organisations will be supporting. Please keep an eye and ear out for ways in which you can support it - whether it's to make a small donation to the always-cash-strapped small organisations that campaign so hard against puppy farms or to protest outside the pet superstores which continue to sell puppies from dubious sources.

You might also want to write to the Kennel Club. For despite publicly condemning puppy farms, they quietly continue to register dogs produced by them. Yes, that's right: the Kennel Club registers puppy-

farmed dogs. It's a shocker, isn't it?

So I'll repeat it. While the Kennel Club issues statements like this one: "The Kennel Club is at the forefront of moves to try and end the complex and harmful business of puppy farming", behind the scenes, it takes the puppy farmers' and backyard breeders' filthy lucre and issues Kennel Club pedigree certificates in exchange.

Registering concern
"Yes, it's true," says Ronnie from the campaigning Puppy Love group (she can't give her surname for fear of reprisals). "We know of two licensed breeders in Carmarthenshire, producing multi-breed dogs, who boast that their puppies are Kennel Club registered. One is licensed for 84 dogs, the other for 61. They have several different breeds and the dogs are kept in terrible conditions. I am disgusted by it."

Clarissa Baldwin, chief executive of Dogs Trust, is also concerned. "I have talked to the Kennel Club about this on a number of occasions. I fear that the general public are duped into thinking that they are buying a fit and healthy

puppy when they buy one with a piece of parchment and the KC name behind it."

Dogs Trust has, traditionally, had a close relationship with the Kennel Club, choosing the role of 'critical friend' rather than battle-sworn enemy, in the belief that more progress will be made that way. But on this particular issue, Clarissa Baldwin is uncompromising. "No, I do not believe the KC should register dogs from puppy farms. It would be simply wonderful to think that the KC mark was indeed a mark of excellence."

To be fair, while the KC doesn't exactly shout its puppy-farming credentials from the rooftops, when tackled they don't deny it. But what's going on here? Why does the KC register puppy-farmed dogs?

At the moment, for a puppy to qualify for registration, its parents have to be registered with the Kennel Club and both be of the same breed. It could look like a frog; it could be bald, have one ear and three eyes, but if mum and dad are registered German Shepherds, then it can be registered with the Kennel Club.

So change the rules! Doh! >



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< When I challenged KC chairman Ronnie Irving over this when making *Pedigree Dogs Exposed*, he alluded to legal reasons why they couldn’t get tough. “We can’t do certain things, because under the European competition law, we’re not allowed to do certain things,” he said, somewhat vaguely. “We’re not allowed to throw our weight around too much.”

Well, we checked, and we could find no legal reason why the Kennel Club could not be as strict as they like about what dogs they register. After all, if the KC refused to register a puppy and the breeder went to an alternative registry, that would be pro-competition, wouldn’t it?

They are a club (as indeed the name suggests), and, as such, can set down whatever rules they like as long as they are not illegal - such as, say, refusing to register puppies bred by someone who is disabled. Indeed, there are already some restrictions in place. For instance, the KC won’t register puppies born of a bitch older than eight years old or one that has already had six litters.

So why not change the rules? Well, it isn’t quite that simple.

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would reduce the KC’s income through the loss of registrations, although, of course, it would. No, the real problem is the cost of administrating a scheme that has complex rules.

For argument’s sake, let’s suppose the Kennel Club decided that, from now on, they will only register puppies that a) have been with their mother until they are eight weeks old b) were well-socialised and c) from a dam that had at least one hour’s exercise/socialisation a day herself.

Not black and white

The KC currently registers around 250,000 dogs a year - at a guess, around 50,000 litters a year. How on earth would they check up on all of those? It’s not just the physical checking, of course, but the enormous cost of dealing with complaints and tip-offs, aggrieved puppy buyers and furious breeders who feel they’ve been wrongly targeted. The Kennel Club points out that it could be sued if it wrongly refused to register a litter of puppies on the grounds that minimum health and welfare standards had not been met.

So it’s not as black and white as you might think. Some of the KC’s current income goes on doing good things for dogs. If they stopped registering puppy-farmed dogs and had to put in place a costly scheme to monitor

all breeders, there would be less money to spend on, say, research into genetic diseases.

“We get this constant criticism that we register these puppies from puppy farmers,” says the KC’s Caroline Kisko. “My guess is yes, we do, but I would put money on the majority of true puppy farmers not registering with us because a Kennel Club pedigree costs money - and it’s just as easy to sell the puppies with a pretty pedigree that is not a KC one. The buyer knows no different.”

It’s a curiously passive approach for an organisation that is keen to promote health and welfare. Why is it only a “guess” that they register puppy-farmed dogs? And could the KC not put more effort into publicising the difference between a KC pedigree and a meaningless one?

When further challenged, Mrs Kisko says: “Now firstly, how do you know they are a puppy

farmer? We cannot just say, ‘Well, we won’t just register X’s puppies,’ because we don’t even know who X is. And we cannot rely on other people’s views because they’ve got their own agendas about who’s a puppy farmer and who isn’t.”

So how does the Kennel Club define a puppy farmer? “A puppy farmer is somebody that breeds puppies with no worry about the welfare of the bitch or how the puppies are looked after.”

Accredited breeders

In other words, a puppy farmer isn’t just the dodgy kennels in south Wales that keeps breeding bitches in filthy conditions. A puppy farmer could be anyone - including the show breeders we heard of during making *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* who keep dozens of dogs stacked up in crates in sheds at the end of their gardens.

So in addition to the cost of administrating a checking system, there’s a problem of definition. This is why, says the KC, it introduced the Accredited Breeder Scheme, which does have some tougher rules and is policed, albeit rather minimally. >

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< “What you can do is set aside a whole lot of people who we know are good breeders and encourage people to buy from them,” says Caroline Kisko. “We have inspectors going out and checking the kennels. Checking what they are doing, how they’re selling, how they’re socialising, how they’re looking after puppies. That’s the way to go.”

It certainly allows the KC to have their cake and eat it. But the crazy situation now exists whereby a breeder can be struck off the Accredited Breeder Scheme over welfare concerns but the very same breeder can still register their puppies with the Kennel Club.

Serious flaws

“The KC have argued that their Accredited Breeder Scheme is the answer, which is a tacit admission as to the serious flaws in their main registry,” says Ryan O’Meara of C-fidos (Coalition For Improved Dog Ownership Standards). “What would stop the Kennel Club from simply disbanding its registry and insisting that all registrations would only be accepted in accordance with the Accredited Breeder Scheme standards? The answer: Nothing.”

And that’s why, having hauled the Kennel Club over the coals for continuing to register dogs from parents that have not been

health-tested, I am not going to let them off the hook on the puppy-farm issue, either. It’s utterly scandalous that they endorse puppy farms in this way and it needs to stop because it’s ill-gotten income that leaves a dreadful taste in the mouth.

It’s not just puppy farmers. The KC and show breeders are often quick to point out how evil ‘backyard breeders’ (BYBs) are, too. This is another loose term - meant to cover pretty much everyone who isn’t a member of a breed club. BYBs, say the show-breeders, don’t health-test, are often ignorant, and flog their pups to unsuspecting buyers via the small ads or on internet puppy sites. Notwithstanding that I don’t think you have to be a member of a breed club to produce a healthy puppy of quality, clearly

Don’t forget
- Puppy Farm
Awareness Day,
19 September.
Spread the
word!

there can be problems. And yet the KC registers these, too. In fact, the majority of dogs

registered in many breeds have not been bred by a club member.

It’s not fair to place all of the blame at the Kennel Club’s door. This is a complex

problem fuelled first and foremost by a

quick-fix public wanting a puppy NOW and not being fussy enough about where it comes from. But the KC needs to do more.

“While the KC has been gaining financial stability, it could be argued that it has been done mainly with funds from those very breeders who are dragging the dedicated dog breeder into public disrepute,” wrote Steven Seymour in *Dog World* in April. “No matter what argument they offer, the bottom line to those who

call the shots has always been influenced by money. To clamp down on puppy farmers who use the register would mean a huge drop in revenue, which, in turn, means an end to the empire building and expansion programmes that the corporate world loves. This business decision may have been a good one in financial terms, but to what cost now?”

A no-brainer

Mr Seymour and many others have called for a more democratic Kennel Club. And if you took a vote on it, of course most dog lovers would like the Kennel Club to stop registering dogs that have not been bred to a minimum health and welfare standard, even if it meant there was less money available to spend on research and other worthy causes.

It’s a no-brainer, surely? ::

Jemima Harrison is a journalist/TV producer best known for making *Pedigree Dogs Exposed*, the BBC1 film that highlighted health and welfare problems in pedigree dogs. Jemima owns a working Flat Coated Retriever and several crossbreeds. Passionate about dogs, she also runs a small independent rescue specialising in finding homes for retriever crosses

