

Court Battle Continues Over Katrina Dogs

Judge rules that custody case will go to trial in April.

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A judge has denied a motion that would have allowed two Florida women to keep two dogs who were left behind by a Louisiana couple in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Steven and Dorreen Couture, of St. Bernard Parish, La., filed suit in June 2006 to reclaim two dogs displaced during the hurricane and adopted by Pam Bondi and Rhonda Rineker, both of Dunedin, Fla.

The suit also faults the Humane Society of Pinellas, Fla., the organization that adopted out the dogs.

The Coutures left the dogs at a makeshift shelter after Hurricane Katrina. The couple has said they were told at the shelter they could reclaim the dogs later. The dogs were brought to Florida by the Humane Society in September 2005 and were adopted the following month.

The Coutures eventually tracked the dogs — a St. Bernard and a German Shepherd Dog mix — to Tampa Bay. But by then, Bondi had adopted the St. Bernard and Rineker the Shepherd mix.

Rineker's attorney had argued that the Humane Society of Pinellas, Fla., took legal custody of the dogs using lawful "police power" before adopting them out. But in a Feb. 1 ruling, Judge Henry J. Andringa disagreed, saying "the two dogs in question were not impounded pursuant to the (county's) ordinance."

The judge's ruling will send the case over the dogs' ownership to trial, currently scheduled for April 16.