

Multi-State Dogfighting Operation Busted

More than 300 dogs were seized from an operation believed to have spanned six states.

Posted: July 9, 2009, 5 a.m. EDT

A multi-state dogfighting operation was raided July 8, the largest of its kind to take place in the United States, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Humane Society of Missouri. More than 300 dogs, mostly pit bulls, were seized.

The two organizations are working in cooperation with the Missouri State Highway Patrol, the United States Department of Agriculture's Office of the Inspector General, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Marshals Service and the United States Attorney.

Investigators from the Humane Society of Missouri Animal Cruelty Task Force provided the information that led to the investigation.

The dogfighting operation is believed to have spanned six states and included arrests in Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. Dogs are being safely transported to a secure facility under the direction of the task force, where they will receive veterinary care.

"We are grateful to the state and federal agencies for aggressively pursuing this investigation and bringing to justice those who perpetuate the systematic torture of dogs for sport and profit," said Kathy Warnick, president of the Humane Society of Missouri. "Dogfighting is happening in every community in our state, right under our noses. Hopefully, public awareness and outrage will bring an end to this cruel and heinous form of animal abuse."

Animal behaviorists from the Humane Society of Missouri and the ASPCA will evaluate the dogs being cared for and determine their suitability for possible placement with rescue groups or individual adopters. They will then make recommendations about each animal to the U.S. District Court, which will make the final decision for each animal.

The U.S. Department of Justice sent out a series of media alerts July 8 announcing various arrests associated with the dogfight operation.

For instance, Matt Whitworth, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, said that seven defendants from Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska have been indicted by a federal grand jury for participating in a conspiracy to promote and participate in dogfights. This is in addition to 19 other defendants being charged in separate cases in three other districts, he said.

Eight individuals were also charged in Texas with involvement in the interstate dogfighting ring, said John Bales, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Texas.

"I commend the agents and officers who have worked very hard on this investigation," Bales said. "In due time, we look forward to presenting all the evidence that they have collected in federal court."

The ASPCA is collecting evidence for the prosecution of the criminal case, as well as lending the service of its forensic cruelty investigation team. The team is comprised of disaster animal rescuers, field service investigators and forensic veterinarian Melinda Merck, DVM. The ASPCA's Mobile Animal Crime Scene Investigation Unit, which collects and processes evidence at crime scenes, is also in the field.

This dogfight investigation is the latest in a series of major animal fighting investigations conducted throughout the country since the passage of the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. The act was signed into law in May 2007, making it a felony to participate in dogfighting.

If convicted, each defendant could face up to five years in prison and/or fines up to \$250,000.