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### PIT BULLS: DILEMMA AND DEBATE

By Katina Antoniadis

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The mere mention of pit bulls can be enough to ignite debate among animal welfare professionals and the public alike, but a discussion on the topic at last week's Animal Care Expo included a general sentiment most would agree with: We've only just begun to tackle abuse of the breed.

Mark your calendar for **Animal Care Expo 2007**, May 9-12, in Dallas, Texas!

At the March 9 general session of its annual conference for the sheltering and rescue community, The Humane Society of the United States held a forum on pit bulls with two leaders of the field: Wayne Pacelle, HSUS president and CEO, and Donna Reynolds, executive director of BAD RAP (Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls). Though PETA president Ingrid Newkirk was testifying in court and had to cancel plans to attend, she sent a videotaped statement in her stead.

The discussion hit close to home for many local attendees of the conference, held at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim. In the wake of several high-profile dog attacks, California has been a hotbed of activity for proposed legislation targeting the breeding and ownership of pit bulls; in October, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation allowing local municipalities to enact breed-specific spay/neuter ordinances.

In her video statement, Newkirk began the discussion by responding to criticism that her organization's stance on pit bull-specific rules stem from a grudge against the breed. "I have yet to meet an animal I didn't care to protect," she said, but added that as long as there are homeless animals in shelters, PETA opposes the breeding of all dogs: "Bringing a litter into the world ... signs a death warrant for the same number."

Results of a pit bull survey distributed during Expo will be published in a future issue of *Animal Shelters* magazine. For more information on breed-specific legislation and efforts to combat dogfighting, visit [www.animalfighting.org](http://www.animalfighting.org).

While PETA includes pit bulls in its general position against dog breeding, Newkirk said that if she could halt the breeding of just one kind of dog, she'd choose pits because they are the most abused.

Most of the pits PETA sees are severely neglected, often serving simply as "currency" or a symbol of manhood for many young male pit bull owners, said Newkirk. While showing photographs of pits PETA has helped, Newkirk described the conditions of the dogs upon rescue: they were suffering from heartworm or other parasites, scarred from fights, starved, and dehydrated.

#### The Need for Outreach

Though Reynolds of BAD RAP expressed similar concerns, saying that "the darkest day for pit bulls is now," she outlined a different approach to addressing the problem. Taking over the mike following Newkirk's video, Reynolds emphasized that animal protection laws should not be limited to one breed. BAD RAP believes that breed-specific legislation

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(including mandatory spay/neuter) is ineffective and “creates more problems than it solves,” she said.

Founded in 1999, BAD RAP is a small, San Francisco–based organization that educates the public, rescues and places pits, and supports pit bull guardians. The group relies heavily on community partnerships and enjoys a close relationship with the East Bay SPCA, which serves Alameda and Contra Costa counties. In fact, said Reynolds, the shelter recently offered up its facility as a “home base” where BAD RAP can run its pit bull ambassador program, training classes, and other outreach initiatives.

Though the public believes that dogfighting is the number–one problem facing pit bulls, a 2005 roundtable discussion among rescuers, breeders, and shelters concluded that the greatest challenge is overbreeding, Reynolds said. To combat this trend, BAD RAP works with responsible breeders, encourages breeders to “slow down,” and conducts outreach in communities where pit bulls are the favored pet. Lack of ethnic diversity in animal welfare agencies has historically translated into a dearth of outreach to non–white dog owners, said Reynolds, but her group aims to change that.

Through a program called “Pit Fix,” owners can take advantage of free spay/neuter surgeries for pit bulls at the East Bay SPCA. BAD RAP also offers free vaccination fairs in neighborhoods with high concentrations of pit bulls; owners who attend these events receive free leashes, collars, advice, and the chance to sign up for free spay/neuter surgeries as well.

The programs “create an opening for discussion,” Reynolds said, and they produce results: Last year, 607 pit bulls were sterilized for free in Alameda County, and BAD RAP’s free training classes (which accept dog–aggressive pits) have received an “overwhelming response.”

In her conclusions, Reynolds told the audience, “We have the obligation to be fearless in searching for solutions to the crisis this noble breed is facing.”

### **Breed–Specific Legislation Is Not the Answer**

As the final speaker, Pacelle said he hadn’t found much to disagree with in either Newkirk’s or Reynolds’s speeches, admitting that the subject of pit bulls has sparked internal debate among staff members at The HSUS. Though The HSUS opposes breed–specific legislation, he said, mere opposition is no longer enough.

“I will confess that this is one of the issues that I personally struggle with, more than just about any other animal issue,” Pacelle said.

Likening the public perception of pit bulls to that of sharks and mountain lions, Pacelle said that society often divides animals into “good” and “bad”—and that media portrayals only aggravate the primal fear humans have of certain species. Recalling his childhood in a coastal community, Pacelle noted the effect the movie *Jaws* had on human behavior; its cultural impact contributes to the annual toll of 100 million shark deaths at the hands of people each year. Political leaders of today, frightened by reports of dog attacks, tend to think of pit bulls as a kind of “terrestrial Jaws” deserving of similar treatment, he said.

Pit bulls are indeed “remarkable creatures” with impressive physical traits, Pacelle said, but they didn’t attract much attention during his childhood. Back then, the dogs most feared were Dobermans and German shepherds.

The decade–to–decade evolution of the “dangerous” label from one breed to the next is one reason The HSUS opposes breed–specific legislation, said Pacelle. While there is merit to the argument that such legislation applied to pit bulls may curb the incidence of dogfighting, history shows that banning one breed won’t prevent people from obtaining and exploiting another. And a number of factors unrelated to

breed can lead to dog attacks in general: lack of sterilization, inhumane confinement, and lack of socialization, to name a few. The point was underscored, Pacelle said, in a recent article in the *New Yorker* by Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*. Even though the so-called “dangerous” breeds come and go and change with time, Gladwell wrote, the total number of people killed by dogs has remained constant.

### The Need for More Creative Solutions

Yet despite its belief that breed bans are ineffective and difficult to enforce, The HSUS recognizes the need to do more than merely oppose them—and that’s why the organization ultimately decided to remain neutral on the California legislature’s seal of approval of local breed-specific spay/neuter laws.

“We know the pit bull problem is getting worse,” Pacelle said, “and doing nothing is not going to help solve the problem.”

Idaho and Wyoming have yet to make dogfighting a felony, but law enforcement officials in general are taking the crime more seriously than in the past, Pacelle said. The animal welfare community has only just begun to battle illegal animal fighting, and The HSUS’s first approach is to go after the “kingpins of the industry,” he said.

Still, Pacelle agreed with Reynolds that the strong arm of the law won’t have a significant impact on the sociological factors leading to pit bull abuse. In looking for other creative solutions, The HSUS has hired a firm in Chicago to study attitudes toward street fighting, he said.

In response to an audience member who wondered how she should handle the media frenzy that follows pit bull attacks, Pacelle spoke of the importance of acknowledging societal failures.

“We should never just reflexively start defending pit bulls and not express sympathy for a family who is grieving over the loss of a family member who was attacked,” he said. “We have a responsibility to get out the facts. If you were to ban these animals, the wrong people would still be out there obtaining the animals to do the same sort of behavior. And I think we need to show the longitudinal information that demonstrates it’s not just pit bulls.”

Though the general session concluded before the panelists could address all questions, HSUS Vice President John Snyder said the Expo session was just the beginning.

“I am very pleased to tell you that the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators contacted me before this meeting to say they want to take this to the next level at their meeting in Nashville in November,” said Snyder to an applauding audience, “so that The HSUS and SAWA can keep this on a roll and figure out what we can do with pit bull issues in America.”

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