



Issue Analysis: Rescue Dogs and Stopping a Potential Danger



Americans love dogs. As a nation, we own approximately 80 million and acquire another 8 million each year.

Anyone who has stared into the beseeching eyes of a pup who wants nothing more than to pass time on a welcoming lap or have her ears gently scratched knows that these are far more than cherished pets. They are family members.

Regardless of origin, they should be a source of joy – not of danger. But what many people don't realize is a new danger associated with pets that are misleadingly labeled as rescues. Unscrupulous distributors take advantage of Americans' wellknown love for dogs, and their empathy for an underdog. As a result, the United States has become a dumping ground for foreign "puppy mill" and "rescue" dogs, importing an estimated one million dogs annually from Turkey, several countries in the Middle East, and as far away as China and Korea, according to the National Animal Interest Alliance.

Rescues are a favored venue to acquire a family pet – in 2016 some 44 percent of dog owners adopted their pet from a shelter, rescue, humane society, or public adoption event.

Historically, rescue groups were run by committed breeders, kennel clubs or other experts who carefully vetted a small number of dogs that came into their possession and matched them with appropriate homes. But with the popularity of the "adopt don't

shop movement", the sale of large numbers of random-source dogs deceptively labeled as "rescue pets" has become a big business.

While rescues can still be a good choice for pet owners willing to do their homework, the bottom line is that there's a risk with selecting a pet designated as a "rescue." It's hard to know if a rescue dog was legitimately in need of re-homing, bred for the retail rescue market or a random-source foreign animal imported en masse. And without records on origin and health, chances increase it could have serious temperament issues and be carrying serious diseases.

Part of the problem surrounds the validity of health records for imported dogs. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, health certificates required for entry into the US are **often invalid or forged**.¹ What's more, dogs from other countries are not subject to the health and welfare laws of professionally-bred U.S. dogs and may arrive **carrying serious and infectious canine diseases**.²

It's not surprising that in conjunction with a surge in dog imports, the United States has experienced an increase in instances of dogs with rabies -- including the canine variant that had previously been thought eradicated here -- canine flu, screwworm, brucellosis, and a variety of other infectious diseases directly related to irresponsibly imported pets.

1. <http://www.weau.com/home/headlines/CDC-issues-health-alert-about-imported-dogs-with-falsified-documentation-261697781.html?ref=781>

2. http://www.naiaonline.org/uploads/Main_Upload_Directory/healthAlertQuestionableDocs.pdf



The dynamic of importing potentially sick animals and exposing others is compounded by risky measures at the state level that restrict consumers to choosing dogs identified as "rescues" or from random sources. For example, so-called puppy mill legislation passed in 2017 in California eliminates the sale of dogs, cats and rabbits sourced from regulated professional breeders in pet shops throughout the state. Instead, pet stores are forced to sell only those animals obtained through shelters or rescues. A similar law recently went into effect in Maryland.

Limiting the sale of pets from regulated professionals in favor of rescues creates a perverse demand and incentive to import greater numbers of street dogs and dogs of unknown origins for U.S. pet suppliers.

The importation of sick dogs now has the attention of U.S. lawmakers, with the government taking the initial steps to slow their importation.

House and Senate panels recently approved measures requiring the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide an estimate of the number of dogs annually imported into the country, along with an estimate of how many of them lack proper health paperwork. The proposals were added to the farm bill, which is currently moving through conference.

The congressional proposals are a good start to understand the breadth of the dog importation danger, but more needs to be done to protect public health.

What other actions are necessary?

- The government must strengthen efforts to ensure that all dogs imported into the United States are fully immunized, free of infection, parasites and contagious diseases.
- They should be individually certified as such by a qualified veterinarian.
- No pet should be imported without an individual examination, valid veterinary certificate, and documentation

regarding the source of the dog and the party responsible for it upon arrival into the United States.

- Perhaps most importantly, regulators at the state and federal levels should boost direct oversight of rescues and shelters.

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Don't be fooled. Retail rescues comprise a large industry whose marketing emphasizes the feel-good aspect of choosing a dog from an unknown situation. This is in sharp contrast to more traditional approaches of acquiring a dog from a reputable breed rescue or a breeder that emphasizes known background, breed characteristics and purposeful breeding programs with valid paperwork attesting to the animal's health.

“Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole,” said wildlife photographer Roger Caras.”

That sincere sentiment goes for a purposefully-bred and raised Labrador Retriever, German Shepherd or Pug as much as it does a rescue animal. Consumers should have the choice. ■