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UC Davis program slams Kern animal control

BY JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer
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Kern County's animal shelter is critically underfunded, disorganized and incapable of humanely dealing with the growing number of animals coming into its kennels.

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Photo by Felix Adamo

In this March 2008 photo, this male shepherd mix was seconds away from being added to the group of dogs, upper right, that have euthanized by Kern County Animal Control.

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The result is illness, suffering and death, according to a report developed during "informal animal consultations" done in 2007 by the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program.

Animal Control officials have not previously made the report public.

"We only got it three or four weeks ago," said David Price, director of the county's Resource Management Agency, which oversees county Animal Control.

Animal Control Chief Denise Haynes said the county received the report on April 8.

Price has not yet read the report, which was requested by county staff, he said.

"We asked for this because this is part of the process that is going to help us improve," he said.

The Californian obtained a copy of the document on Wednesday from Marilyn Stewart, of ALPHA Canine Sanctuary in Bakersfield.

Stewart said the most dramatic section of the report relates to the treatment of feral cats in the shelter.

The report states that feral cats are stacked in cages in inadequate space. The cats are carried into the cages dangling by the neck from catch poles.

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On two occasions, the report said, the whole population of the feral cat room has been killed to avoid the epidemic spread of "horrible" infections caused by the cramped treatment of the animals.

Stewart said the situation has been exposed to Hayes by repeated staff and veterinary reports made since 2005.

She has asked, in a letter to the Kern County Board of Supervisors, for Haynes to be removed from her position.

"Anyone that can condone this for that length of time doesn't belong there," she said.

Haynes said she and her staff have been struggling to deal with the feral cat issue — fixing it in small steps over time.

The shelter has many issues that need work, she said.

"We can't fix everything at the same time. We can only put brain power into a few things," Haynes said. "It was not as if we were being callous. It was 'How do we fit this into my fix it pile.'"

Aside from that cruel treatment, Stewart said much of the problems at the shelter are not the fault of shelter staff.

"There is a lot in there that is disturbing due to animal overpopulation," Stewart said.

In general, the report states that the shelter is dramatically underfunded, staff remain overwhelmed and under-trained and systems and procedures need a number of significant improvements.

It also says dramatic levels of animal intake — indicating an animal overpopulation problem in Kern County — are a major factor in the shelter's problems.

"Although many staff members were clearly dedicated and caring, and in some cases were exerting heroic efforts to provide for the animals in the shelter, it was evident that the capacity of programs, staff and facility was exceeded in almost every area of animal housing and care. The result was a breakdown in care leading to illness, animal suffering and likely unnecessarily high levels of euthanasia and death," the report states in its overview.

Price said the report confirms the pervasive truth about animal control problems — there isn't enough money to run the department.

"It's a resource issue," he said. "It always has been."

Chances are that even the report won't change that.

The report becomes public just as Kern County Supervisors, facing a \$47.7 million shortfall in their 2008–2009 budget, have publicly rejected the idea of spending more money on shelter programs.

Their reasoning: People are more important than animals.

It also comes as the Kern County Animal Control Commission makes a final recommendation as to how supervisors should address animal overpopulation with new programs — and funding.

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