

Death by a Thousand Cuts
by Rob Sexton

How the animal rights lobby uses legitimate crusades—like the abolishment of puppy mills—as a smokescreen to kill hunting

The animal rights lobby has evolved over the forty plus years of its existence in America. Once content to throw harmless bombshells of rhetoric and protest at hunting, circuses, rodeos and zoos, the movement has honed its attack to policy changes that could devastate the future of sporting dog breeds.

Animal rights leaders have learned that the frontal approach yields far less fruit than opportunistic attempts at policy change. The sportsmen's community had a better than ninety percent record of killing anti-hunting legislation during the 1980s and 1990s. The "antis" made it easy to mobilize hunters when they attempted outright bans on hunting with hounds. It was relatively easy to persuade other sportsmen that these were first steps on the slippery slope towards banning all hunting.

HSUS AND THE LAW OF *INTENDED* CONSEQUENCES

Largely unnoticed by the mainstream press, things began changing around the turn of the twenty-first century. The media devotes far too much attention to the lunatic ravings of the extremist elements of the animal rights movement such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta). "Jesus was a vegetarian" campaigns are great fodder for the media pundits, but they have little to do with what is really happening in the animal rights movement.

The largest and most powerful organization in the animal rights lobby is the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). Located in Washington DC, the organization does not operate animal shelters as its name would suggest. Instead its mission is to change public policy as it relates to animals. HSUS has waged war on livestock farmers, medical researchers, the entertainment industry, hunters and anglers and more. Its CEO is Wayne Pacelle, a longtime activist and protégé of anti-hunting icon and television critic, Cleveland Amory.

Since becoming chief executive at HSUS, Pacelle has sought to soften the militant image of the animal rights lobby. He has disavowed organizations such as Animal Liberation Front, which blows up medical labs where life saving research is conducted on animals. He has shunned the radical campaigns of Peta, the Hollywood darling of the movement. Instead he has carefully selected campaigns that are very appealing to the public, the media, elected officials and government decision makers.

Harnessing Americans' Love for Dogs

One such campaign has been on behalf of "man's best friend." Over the past ten years, HSUS has championed a barrage of legislation allegedly aimed at protecting canines. These include bills banning animal fighting, beefing up animal cruelty statutes, mandatory spay and neuter legislation and efforts to eliminate so called "puppy mills." On their face, each and every one of these endeavors seems noble. What reasonable person supports dog fighting? Who doesn't want laws that prohibit animal cruelty? Who is not saddened to hear about the hundreds of thousands of stray dogs that are euthanized every year in animal shelters? Who is not repulsed when shown footage of an unscrupulous puppy dealer who places profit far above the suffering of dogs in breeding kennels?

Therefore, it comes as a terrible surprise to many dog lovers to learn that sportsmen across America have opposed all of these efforts. Why? Because the devil, as they say, is in the details.

The U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance: Sportsmen's Answer to the Animal Rights Lobby

The United States Sportsmen's Alliance (USSA) is a national non-profit organization located in Columbus, Ohio that tracks and analyzes legislation across the country that impacts American sportsmen. Because so many anti-hunting attacks have been aimed at hunting with dogs, USSA formed the Sporting Dog Defense Coalition (SDDC) more than ten years ago. The SDDC is a rallying point for people and organizations of all stripes with one thing in common, their love of hunting with dogs. The coalition facilitates a united front of sporting dog owners to prosecute well orchestrated political campaigns to stop the animal rights movement from passing laws that will destroy hunting with dogs.

USSA's staff of legislative professionals discovered that every one of these legislative proposals contained language that would negatively impact a dog owner's or kennel operator's ability to function. These proposals criminalize commonly accepted hunting practices, excessively drive up the cost of operating a kennel, prevent hunters from breeding sporting dogs, overburden breeders with a deluge of paperwork, and more.

For example, bills that were supposed to stamp out animal fighting defined the crime as training one animal to pursue, attack, kill or attempt to do any of these things to another animal. This means hunting with dogs and participating in field trials would be classified as animal fighting.

Bills strengthening animal cruelty statutes included language allowing search and seizures without warrants. The bills made dog owners pay the cost of housing their confiscated dogs while they were being prosecuted even if they were not convicted! They prohibited tethering unless the owner was present at all times.

Legislation purported to address too many strays actually mandates spaying and neutering of all dogs, including hunting dogs, show dogs, and dogs used in field trials.

And efforts to crack down on "puppy mills," which are described as large abusive commercial dog breeding facilities, also impact private kennels such as foxhound and beagle kennels. Requirements in these bills result in thousands of dollars in cost-prohibitive upgrades that are wholly unnecessary. Restrictions in this type of legislation criminalize private kennel operators for even the smallest infractions. Record-keeping requirements in these proposals are more extensive than those for child day care centers.

The Real Agenda Behind The Smokescreen: the Destruction of Sporting Dog Kennels

Honest drafting errors are possible when trying to address the concerns of dog owners. However, one doesn't have to be a conspiracy theorist to understand that these overly broad and restrictive bills are part of a larger agenda. HSUS and its allies employ smart people who have the ability to draft targeted legislation. To repeatedly draft proposals that reach beyond the stated scope is clearly intentional.

The goal is equally transparent: Instead of continuing to try to ban hunting with hounds, make it impossible to breed hunting dogs in the first place. Make it too expensive. Make it too hard to function within the laws that are passed. Make the paperwork so extensive that private, non-profit kennels cannot conform without hiring staff they cannot afford. Instead of banning hunting with dogs, the sheer weight of these types of laws make raising and hunting with dogs

too miserable to continue. It is a “death by a thousand cuts.”

The Animal Rights Strategy: Exploit Dog Lovers to Eliminate Sporting Dog Kennels

The strategy is to capitalize on America’s nearly universal adoration for dogs. When the public is told about the abuses the “antis” claim to be targeting, it responds with understandable outrage. It makes for good television on news programs. Even sporting dog owners lined up to help stamp out “puppy mills.” Elected officials are quick to join the fray to please their constituents. HSUS and similar organizations are quick to supply a solution. By the time sportsmen find out about such proposals, supporters have built up momentum. Many elected officials endorse these measures without understanding the full impact. For opponents (sportsmen), it is like sailing into the perfect storm.

PENNSYLVANIA: A MAJOR TEST CASE

Such was the case in Pennsylvania in 2006. Animal rights groups successfully convinced the media to expose deplorable conditions in some abusive dog breeding facilities in Southeast Pennsylvania. Although the coverage only centered around a few licensed kennels in one county, the media labeled Pennsylvania “The Puppy Mill Capitol of the East.”

The story caught the eye of the state’s most powerful politician, Governor Ed Rendell, who was running for re-election against former Pittsburgh Steeler legend, Lynn Swann. Rendell, an avowed dog lover, lent his considerable political clout to the issue. He fired the Dog Law Advisory Board, which is charged with overseeing enforcement of the state’s kennels. He appointed passionate kennel reformers to replace the old board. He committed to “remove the stain of ‘puppy mills’ from the good name of the Commonwealth.” He then charged his new staff at the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture with the task of creating regulations to address the problem. The East coast media roared with approval.

Dog fanciers, shelter operators, dog rescue volunteers, and even sporting dog owners all supported the cause...until they read the regulations. Remarkably no dog interests were consulted as the state constructed its draft. Instead regulators worked with dog activists affiliated with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

The new regulations were forty-five pages of the most restrictive, over-specific, burdensome, cost prohibitive set of animal care proposals seen anywhere in the United States. And they applied to all licensed kennels.

The regulations dictated how all kennels must be constructed. They specified how many air exchanges must occur in a kennel each hour. They set temperature requirements for the air and the concrete floors of kennels, and light diffusion requirements throughout kennels. Rust on a kennel fence was a violation of the law. The regulations required written exercise plans for every dog in a licensed kennel. A veterinary exemption was required for a dog missing even one day of the required twenty minutes of daily exercise. Hunting and field trials did not count toward the requirement. In total, the regulations were devastating to all licensed kennel operators.

The Masters of Foxhounds Association (MFHA) contacted the USSA for help. MFHA and USSA have successfully collaborated to defeat previous animal rights sponsored legislation across the country. Here they joined with beaglers, basseters and other sportsmen’s organizations. In addition to sportsmen, opposition came from the American Kennel Club and its state affiliate. The Farm Bureau joined along with rescue kennel officials and animal shelter operators, and even university research kennels. All understood that the regulations would spell

the end of licensed kennels. A reasonable person would conclude that the Department of Agriculture would realize that it had overreached in its proposal.

A reasonable person would be wrong. Department officials told USSA staff and sporting dog allies that the proposal would go forward.

Just a month later, a bipartisan panel charged with reviewing all pending state regulations reported that not a single licensed kennel was in compliance with the state's proposal. USSA and its Sporting Dog Defense Coalition implored the governor and his Department of Agriculture to withdraw the regulations. The state declined, and committed to seeing the proposal approved.

The state had reason to think it held all the cards. Newspapers and television news programs saluted the governor for his efforts, and detractors were labeled as dog abusers.

Sportsmen's Plan to Defeat the Animal Rights Proposal

USSA, members of the Sporting Dog Defense Coalition, MFHA, and other hunting organizations launched a grassroots recruiting drive to educate sportsmen and sporting dog kennels owners about the impact of the regulations. The coalition grew every week.

The sporting dog groups concentrated their work on generating grassroots pressure on the Department of Agriculture and the governor from three distinct groups of people.

1. Sportsmen were encouraged to contact the governor directly expressing opposition. Thousands responded.
2. Sportsmen swamped the offices of legislators with requests for help. Legislators were asked to tell the governor that they were opposed to or concerned about the regulations.
3. USSA and coalition leaders traveled the state telling the sportsmen's message to every newspaper outlet that would listen. The media tour resulted in a flood of positive coverage.

By the fall of 2007, it became apparent that the Department of Agriculture and the governor's staff were looking for ways to defuse the controversy. Sportsmen and other kennels operators were clear that any crackdown on licensed kennels had to be confined to large commercial breeders that had been the subject of the original exposé on "puppy mills." Sportsmen also demanded that the issue be decided by the legislature so that the public would have a greater opportunity to make sure that the regulations were done in a balanced manner.

The Battle in Pennsylvania Shifts to the Legislature

In December, the state finally agreed to craft new legislation. While an improvement over the terrible regulatory proposal, the proposed bill was still of grave concern to sportsmen. If passed as introduced, House Bill 2525 would have given the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture nearly unlimited enforcement power. It would set its own fees for licensed kennels; make its own regulations as to what was a violation; decide who is in violation; and decide what the penalties would be for a violation. In essence the department would be lawmaker, judge, jury and executioner over all licensed dog kennels. The potential for enforcement abuse was limitless. Worse, the bill allowed for searches of private property even if there was no evidence that a crime had been committed by a kennel operator. It even would have allowed local townships and cities to eliminate kennels through zoning and local ordinances.

The HSUS and ASPCA swung into full attack mode flooding legislators with telephone calls from all over the country in support of HB 2525. Oprah Winfrey did two shows focusing on Pennsylvania's "puppy mills." She put a call to action on the screen for her viewers to use to

encourage calls to Pennsylvania legislators to pressure them into passing the bill.

Sportsmen were already organized for a counterattack. USSA, its Sporting Dog Defense Coalition, and coalition partners brought hundreds of affected private kennel operators to the capitol to personally meet with their own representatives. USSA crafted twenty-six amendments to fix the problems with the bill. USSA and local sporting dog leaders aggressively sold the proposed fix to every legislator who would listen. By the beginning of June it became questionable whether HB 2525 would pass unless the concerns of sportsmen were addressed. The sportsmen's position, however, was not solid either. While many representatives were willing to put a hold on the bill until private kennel concerns could be addressed, they also made it clear that they were going to pass a bill.

At that point the governor's staff and key legislators agreed to twenty-three of USSA's twenty-six amendments, including the search warrant provision. In exchange, the coalition agreed to remove its opposition to House Bill 2525. All of the sportsmen's top priority amendments were addressed. Currently the bill is waiting for a vote on the House floor.

USSA and its allies will have to remain vigilant throughout 2008 to ensure that amendments are not added to the bill which would jeopardize the future of sporting dog kennels. To date, the campaign has cost more than two hundred thousand dollars.

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The Animals Rights Strategy: Spreading Our Defenses Thin

This article concentrates heavily on Pennsylvania because it is surely the most insidious attack on sporting dog enthusiasts ever conceived by the anti-hunting lobby. But while the fires have been the hottest in Pennsylvania, the antis have not been content to wage the war in just one state. Puppy mill bills have been introduced in Georgia, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin. California legislators are just one vote away from a mandatory spay and neuter law. Similar local ordinances have cropped up in Los Angeles, Palm Beach and even Dallas.

The antis' goal is obvious. Introduce enough of these kinds of measures, and surely some of them will pass. The antis know that the United States Sportsmen's Alliance (USSA) is not a giant organization. They are relying on the fact that USSA and its allies will not be able to repulse multiple attacks.

So far, their campaign has failed. USSA, along with the Masters of Foxhounds Association (MFHA) and state and local beagle, basset and other dog organizations continue to answer the bell. Unfortunately, the pace cannot continue without help from more sporting dog owners. USSA needs help. Funds are critically needed to hire good lobbyists and attorneys, activate grassroots, and conduct effective advertising. Volunteers are needed to spread the word and broaden our coalition.

Sporting dog organizations have long supported USSA. It is a lean effective fighting force that has empowered hunters to effectively defend themselves. The campaign in Pennsylvania is proof of what USSA can do with strong local support. Without help, however, USSA cannot hope to defeat the animal rights lobby and its crusade to destroy sporting dog kennels. Please consider making a contribution to the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance today. And remember, the MFHA provides support to the USSA through your Subscribing Membership dues. This is why every foxhunter should be a willing Subscribing Member of the MFHA.

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