

End puppy mills

This time, Ohio lawmakers should pass a bill to ensure humane breeding of dogs
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Dog breeders who can't or won't treat their animals humanely and abide by basic standards for decent care shouldn't be in the business.

Those who do run legitimate businesses shouldn't have a problem with a state law to crack down on puppy mills -- operations in which dogs are crammed into small, filthy cages and forced to produce litter after litter until they die of malnutrition or disease. Pups produced in such conditions often are diseased and suffer from genetic defects because of inbreeding.

Shamefully, Ohio is the nation's second-worst state for puppy mills, and part of the reason is extremely lax regulation of breeding.

Kennels are licensed by local counties, but the license has few requirements and virtually no oversight.

Year after year, bills to crack down on puppy mills are introduced in the General Assembly, but heretofore they all have died quietly, most likely victims of lawmakers who don't want to upset constituents in areas where dog-breeding is popular, or who reflexively dislike government regulation.

But the animals caught in this nasty business deserve better, and lawmakers have another chance to do the right thing, by passing House Bill 129 and Senate Bill 95, introduced in April and currently in committee.

Like previous bills, the current pair would create a Kennel Control Authority, possibly within the Department of Agriculture, to set and enforce rules for humane treatment, including minimum requirements for living space, food, water, time out of cages and veterinary care.

Operators of breeding kennels with nine or more dogs, middlemen who sell the dogs and people who operate animal-rescue groups would be required to obtain licenses. People who have been convicted of or pleaded guilty to animal-cruelty or domestic-violence charges would be ineligible for such licenses.

The bills would require sellers of dogs to provide a bill of good health or offer a full refund if a purchaser's veterinarian determines that a new dog is sick.

Unlike earlier bills, these would ban selling dogs at auctions, flea markets, garage sales, conferences and other nonlicensed venues.

Sen. Jim Hughes, R-Columbus, sponsor of the Senate bill, plans to campaign harder for the issue this time, with testimony materials that will show senators, in graphic detail, the abuses that occur at the hands of the worst breeders.

Lobbyists for animal breeders complain that the bills, if passed, would cost them money.

For breeders who are giving substandard care and producing sick puppies, that may be true. But for breeders with integrity, a strong puppy-mill law would ensure that they aren't undersold by disreputable competitors.

And Ohio no longer would be a haven for cruelty.