

Natalie DiBlasio, USA TODAY 2:58p.m. EST February 28, 2013

**Citing inhumane and unsanitary practices, lawmakers want to regulate online pet sales. The current law allows breeders who sell puppies online to escape all health and safety requirements.**



(Photo: Clay Jackson, AP)

### **Story Highlights**

- The PUPS Act is sponsored by both Democrats and Republicans
- Pets sold online are not guaranteed anything, including food, water and exercise
- The market for pets online is growing

Outraged by stories of abuse, a bipartisan group of lawmakers is looking to protect puppies sold online.

Because of a loophole in the law, pets sold over the Internet are not guaranteed anything -- including food, water, protection from extremes of heat or cold, exercise, or a clean, safe place to live.

A bill introduced in Congress on Wednesday seeks to bring the Internet sellers under the regular oversight of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which enforces the Animal Welfare Act that sets minimum care standards for animals.

"Currently, abusive puppy mills are able to completely evade federal oversight by taking advantage of a pre-Internet loophole in current law, but the PUPS Act would change that," says Nancy Perry, senior vice president of government relations for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "Thousands of these mills have shifted online to evade the law."

The Puppy Uniform Protection and Safety Act – the PUPS act – is sponsored by Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and David Vitter, R-La., and Reps. Jim Gerlach, R-Pa., Sam Farr, D-Calif., Bill Young, R-Fla., and Lois Capps, D-Calif.

The PUPS Act will require all breeders who sell more than 50 dogs annually -- whether through pet stores or online -- to undergo inspections and meet U.S. Department of Agriculture standards for caring for the dogs. The licensing and inspection requirements in the current law do not apply to online sellers.

"The media regularly report stories about dogs rescued from substandard facilities – where dogs are housed in stacked wire cages and seriously ill and injured dogs are routinely denied access to veterinary care," Durbin said. "Online dog sales have contributed to the rise of these sad cases."

The measure also requires that dogs be exercised or given access to an exercise area for 60 minutes a day. Some dogs in the puppy mills behind these websites never get out of their wire cages, says Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States

"We live in an era of online shopping and it should be no surprise that people are looking to the Internet to purchase puppies," Pacelle says. "It removes the purchaser from the conditions of the animals even more. So many of these Internet sellers pretend to be humane breeders but are in fact puppy mills."

Online puppy shopping varies by website. In most cases a buyer orders a dog, pays with a credit card and then the supplier ships the dog over an airline to an airport where the new owner picks them up.



Puppy mill dogs wait for the rescue groups that will take them.(Photo: Sarah Ause, Best Friends Animal Society)

Ricky and Rita Brooks thought they found the perfect dog online , Baxter, an Australian Shepherd that had one brown eye and one baby blue.

"He was such a beautiful little puppy, and he was a good puppy," Rita Brooks says.

But just as quickly as they fell in love, Baxter got sick. A vet told the Brookses the puppy had parasites and parvo.

"The veterinarian said if he'd been vaccinated, he would not have been sick like this," Ricky Brooks says.

There is no federal law that requires someone to provide a healthy animal, but when you can't see the animal before you purchase, it will be hard to know whether they were kept in humane conditions, Pacelle says.

The Sarasota, Fla., breeder who sold the dog online guaranteed the dog's health. But the Brookses say they never got any answers about why Baxter arrived sick. Vet bills were \$2,500 and the puppy eventually died.

"When we got there, he was gasping for air, and we told him how much mommy and daddy loved him and he looked at us one last time and he couldn't breathe, " Rita Brooks says.

Both the Humane Society of the United States and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals have been receiving more and more complaints from buyers like the Brookses, who purchased sick or dying puppies online.



English Bulldog Bertha waits patiently for her food in her kennel at the National Mill Dog Rescue founded by Theresa Strader and located in Peyton, Colo.(Photo: Shauna Intelisano for USA TODAY)

"You are removed from the animals, it's basically a crapshoot on the health of the animals, you can't rely on these websites," Pacelle says.

"The loophole in the Animal Welfare Act created by the Internet has resulted in widespread abuse of dogs in breeding facilities," says Farr, one of the bill's sponsors. "Leaving dogs crammed into small cages with no exercise or social contact goes against our humanity. The PUPS Act is necessary to end the abuses of puppy mills and restore the values of our society."

*Contributing: Tanya Rivera, WFMY-TV*