NERO Plays Home to Homing Pigeon

A pigeon is certainly not an unusual sight in New England, especially in large metropolitan areas where they often gather by the hundreds to feed. But when NERO staff noticed a lone pigeon wandering around in the fields surrounding the regional office for a few days straight, something seemed fishy.

“I thought it was unusual that this same pigeon had been hanging around for so long,” said NERO Director Joanne Bourbeau. “At first I thought he must be injured, but when I got a little closer, I noticed the band around his left leg and realized he was a homing pigeon.”

Bourbeau quickly rounded up the bird in a towel and made a makeshift pen for him until a suitable cage could be acquired. “I took the number off his leg band, and called the state wildlife agency to see if it might keep some record of homing pigeons. They gave me a Web address for the American Racing Pigeon

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Animal Fighting Hits Close to Home

On Tuesday, January 15, police raided the home of Christopher DeVito in the quiet town of Newton, New Hampshire. Officers removed 43 pit bulls from the property and seized a wide array of dogfighting paraphernalia, including steroids, weights, scales, and nearly $300,000 in cash. One dog had a missshapen front leg that may have been caused by an untreated fracture, two puppies from a litter of 10 were found dead, and many of the pit bulls exhibited scars indicative of dogfighting. At the time this newsletter was printed, DeVito faced multiple felony-level charges of exhibiting fighting animals. Class B felonies carry a penalty of up to seven years in jail and a $4,000 fine for each conviction.

Despite increasingly strict laws that have established prohibitions against dog- and cockfighting, these illegal blood sports continue to flourish in many parts of the country, including New England. Fortunately, we are starting to make inroads towards addressing this brutal and deadly "sport" in our region. NERO, in conjunction with the New England Animal Control/Humane Academy, is currently in the process of soliciting a broad-based membership for a regional animal fighting task force. Our goal in establishing this task force—with animal protection and law enforcement representatives from all six New England states—is multifaceted. We seek to improve cross-reporting and communication among law enforcement officers, cruelty investigators, and animal care and control agents both within and across state borders; to provide needed training for those in the field; to educate the public; and to strengthen the laws that address this issue while also supporting their enforcement.

“There’s a real need to create a network through which people can share information and resources,” said NERO Program Coordinator Hillary Twining, who will be coordinating task force activities through our office. Twining recently joined HSUS West Coast Regional Office staff in assisting with a major cockfighting raid in Merced County, California, in which 233 fighting birds were seized. She plans to use this valuable hands-on experience to improve and expand NERO’s response to regional investigations and complaints. In addition, plans for HSUS-sponsored training workshops on conducting animal fighting investigations and caring for pit bulls in animal shelters are already in the works, as is the production of a bi-annual animal fighting newsletter to keep task force members informed about regional and national activities on this front.

In the pending New Hampshire case, continued on page 2
Farm animal welfare is an area of growing concern throughout the country, as evidenced by a federal farm bill that includes amendments addressing the Humane Slaughter Act, the plight of downed animals at auctions and live markets, and the practice of sending baby chicks by air as feed. For food animals raised in intensive confinement systems, also known as factory farms, their care and welfare still inspire strong opinions and disagreements between the public and the farming community.

In the spring of 2001, NERO was asked to join an ad-hoc group of Maine farmers and producers, as well as the Maine Farm Bureau, the Maine Department of Agriculture, and the state veterinarian to discuss current issues and challenges surrounding farm animal welfare. A number of concerns came up, including the continual loss of farmland to suburban development, lack of awareness among many farmers of the state’s animal welfare laws, and consumer demand for humanely raised meat and other products. It soon became clear that many of these issues demanded a larger public forum, and on October 20, 2001, the committee hosted a conference entitled Animal Welfare Impacting Livestock Producers: Issues, Strategies, and Tools in Waterville, Maine.

NERO participated in a panel addressing the impact of farm animal welfare concerns on farmers and producers. The audience asked questions about animal welfare and animal rights, as well other issues of concern to their business. “As the only animal protection organization in attendance, I felt that it was important to stress the ways in which farmers and animal advocates can work together,” said Twining. “This event provided an opportunity to open lines of communication between stakeholders who have traditionally viewed each other with distrust and suspicion.”

NERO will continue to meet with the committe to establish voluntary farm animal welfare certification guidelines for farmers and producers throughout the state.

The living conditions of laying hens are of concern to NERO and others trying to improve the lives of farm animals.

NERO is assisting law enforcement officials by providing HSUS background materials on animal fighting, referrals for expert witnesses, letters of support for the police department and the facilities charged with housing these dogs during the investigation, and other assistance as needed. “We will be keeping a very close eye on this case as it progresses to ensure that DeVito receives the maximum penalties allowed by law if convicted,” said Twining.

Although NERO has been focusing educational efforts on animal care and control professionals, illegal animal fighting is addressed most effectively when individuals throughout a community take an active interest. If you suspect that animal fighting is occurring in your community, we encourage you to call your animal control officer or police department, or contact our office. Together, through citizen involvement and collaborative partnerships and collaborations, we can put an end to the cruelty of animal fighting.

Improving Farm Animal Welfare In Maine

The announcement that the plan had been approved was great news for the state’s animals, as well as for the Vermont Animal Disaster Emergency Planning Team (Adept), which has been meeting to write the document for nearly three years. “Disaster planning never seems to go quickly enough,” explained NERO Director Joanne Bourbeau, who serves as The HSUS representative to ADEPT during the entire process. “But our hard work has finally paid off with a working document that will clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of every primary and supporting agency listed in the plan—including The HSUS, the Vermont Veterinary Medical Association, Vermont Humane Federation, Department of Agriculture, and Department of Fish and Wildlife.” The plan will provide for the coordination of local, state, and national resources in response to animal care needs related to any Vermont emergency.

“We learned from past disasters that emergency plans for animals must go hand-in-hand with plans for humans in order to be effective,” continued Bourbeau. “The finalization of Vermont’s plan will set the stage for our committee to continue important public education efforts and other emergency planning to ensure that animal concerns are included and addressed.”

Legal activism is one of the most important ways to bring about long-term change for animals. Your elected officials make decisions affecting the lives of animals on a regular basis. Since animals cannot vote, we must be their political voice. That’s why NERO joined the Fund for Animals to hold a workshop in Cromwell, Connecticut, entitled Lobby 101. Attendees learned about the legislative process, and about two important initiatives—HSUS Humane Advocate Network (HAN) and NERO’s state action alert teams. The HSUS-HAN is a national network of individuals working to pass federal animal protection legislation by writing, calling, or meeting with their legislators; sending letters to the editor; and exchanging ideas with other activists. “I have seen first-hand how individuals can have a great impact on animal welfare by influencing legislators,” says Kara Holmqvist, HAN’s Massachusetts coordinator. “Legislators listen to the people in their district.”

NERO also maintains six state action alert teams that work on state legislation and regulations affecting animals. Please pass us a note saying you’d like to join our network. Please include your name, address, and phone number. If you include an e-mail address, we will also send you HSUSonline, our electronic legislative newsletter.

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Vermont became the second state in New England to formally adopt a state disaster plan addressing animal concerns. The plan document was finalized and approved in February by all of the state and private agencies that were involved in its creation, including The HSUS. Rhode Island was the first state in New England to adopt such a plan and has since served as a model for Vermont, as well as for Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, which are developing plans as well.

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I want to learn how I can help our animal friends and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

Please send me information about:
- Making a memorial donation to honor the life of a pet, friend, or relative. ___________
- Providing for my pets in my will and in my state disaster plan. ___________
- Planning my estate and will to help animals and The HSUS. ___________

Using charitable gift annuities and trusts to support The HSUS. ___________

Giving The HSUS a gift of stock. ___________

Promoting the protection of all animals.
Director's Report

By Joanne Bourbeau
Director of the New England Regional Office

Providing a Safety Net for Our Pets

Life changed for all of us on September 11. They say ignorance is bliss, and I think this may have been true for many of us who refused to believe that anything so horrific could happen to our own families in our own backyards. We all remember where we were on that fateful day; at those fateful moments. I remember being glad that I lived and worked in a sleepy little town in southern Vermont. They wouldn’t possibly target Jacksonville. Or would they?

The truth is, none of us knew where or if the terrorist attacks would continue. This uncertainty, coupled with horror and disbelief, created a panic unlike any this country has ever seen. And when we panic, it’s natural to first think of our family and friends. And of course this concern extends to the non-human members of our families.

Animals play a huge role in the lives of Americans, with more than 60 percent of families sharing their lives with at least one companion animal. Animals also played a large role in this event. We all saw the pictures of people being evacuated from the area surrounding the World Trade Center—many of them with their pets in carriers or on leashes. The staffs of local animal welfare agencies such as the New York Center for Animal Care and Control and the American SPCA risked their lives to rescue and reunite hundreds of pets with their concerned owners. And the rescue dogs who searched the rubble for survivors alongside their handlers and other emergency personnel were rightfully hailed as heroes. While there weren’t nearly as many human survivors as we had all prayed for, the news story about the Persian cat, Precious, who was found alive in the debris of a nearby apartment building 18 days later, warmed our hearts and gave us hope.

There were many hard lessons learned after September 11. Just one was the necessity of having a disaster plan in place for our families—including our pets. As pet owners, we all have a responsibility to provide for their well being. If taking a few moments to plan ahead will mean the difference between their safety or harm, then I think it’s an effort well worth making.

The good news is that you don’t have to start from scratch. The HSUS has several new publications that can help you prepare your animals for any emergency: “Disaster Preparedness for Pets,” “Disaster Preparedness for Livestock,” and “Disaster Preparedness for Horses” all provide important information about the special plans that need to be made for these species. In addition, “Providing for Your Pet’s Future Without You” gives important information about estate planning for pets.

If you would like a free copy of any of these materials, contact NERO. You can also obtain a copy of “Preparing for Your Pet’s Future Without You” by e-mailing your request to gifts@hsus.org.

My sympathy goes out to the victims of these brutal attacks, and to those who lost a loved one. In this ever-changing world we live in, our pets continue to bring us joy, along with a little hope for a kinder future.

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Union (www.arpu.org), and I eventually traced the owner through them.” Amazingly, the bird had flown 145 miles from Gloucester, Massachusetts, to make its way to Jacksonville, Vermont!

“I learned that most racing pigeons will find their way back home after 24 or 48 hours of rest, but since this was a young bird, he may have never returned without our intervention,” explained Bourbeau. For both the bird and the bird’s owner, David Williams, NERO’s intervention was a bit of good luck. Williams happily made the drive to Vermont to pick up his bird.