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Stray dogs a problem for Navajo Nation
By Ryan Hall, The Daily Times
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A puppy and dog sit in a cage in the back of a Shiprock animal control truck minutes before being euthanized Tuesday at the Shiprock Animal Shelter. An estimated 30 to 40 dogs are euthanized every week at the shelter. Lucas Coshenet/The Daily Times

SHIPROCK — Stray dogs are a big problem on the Navajo Nation, with 30 to 40 unwanted or injured animals put down every week while others are simply struck and killed by oncoming traffic.

"There are more strays out there than nice healthy ones," said Stacey Dahl, animal control officer for the Northern Agency. "That's the biggest issue — strays running loose and unwanted dogs."

Dahl, the only control officer for the Northern Agency and half of the Eastern Agency, can only do so much.

"I'm so behind," she said, noting she catches an average of 10 such animals a day.

Most will be euthanized — as many as 120 per month.

The Farmington Animal Shelter, which is better staffed and serves a much larger, much denser population, put down 178 dogs in June for the county and 129 dogs during the month for the city, according to the shelter's log sheet.

Dahl said the reservation, with few fenced yards, had the same size problem as Farmington or the surrounding areas, but that it was just more visible due to the Department of Animal Control being under staffed and the reservation being more wide open.

The key is in prevention, Dahl said.

"Get your animals spayed or neutered," she said, adding that pet owners can't assume someone else will get their animals fixed instead. "It takes two to tango."

Sharon Morgan, proprietor of Desert Dogs, a rescue organization outside Shiprock, said she believes there are two main causes for Navajos not spaying or neutering pets.

She said the elder and middle-aged generation avoid the procedure mostly due to culture. When they were younger, animals weren't fixed and puppies were used on farms for herding or given to friends or neighbors.

"The older generation will say it's cultural," she said.

However, Morgan said, younger Native Americans are realizing the importance of fixing their pet, but even the relatively low-cost procedure is viewed as too expensive when it is weighed against buying food and gas or doing laundry.

"Actually a lot of people will say it's cultural, but it's more financial. I personally think it's money," she said.

Spaying or neutering a dog costs about \$35 at a low-cost clinic, and between \$100 and \$180 at most vets, according to Dahl.

Dogs also need to be vaccinated against distemper, rabies and other diseases and must be fed and licensed, which runs \$10 at the shelter. Dahl said prospective pet owners should never have more animals than the land or wallet can handle.

"Don't have more animals than you can feed," said Dahl last Tuesday at the Shiprock Animal Shelter, as she slowly pulled each of the 18 dogs

she had caught that day from a cage in the back of the animal control truck.

Inside the pen, several wild puppies crawled over one another and other larger dogs, many of which sported open wounds and infections.

A separate pen held four stray cats that had also been caught that day. Only one dog carried identification. He was placed into one of the six pens the small shelter has, in the hopes his owners will pick him up, or he'll get adopted out.

Dahl had no choice but to euthanize the other 17 animals.

"I don't enjoy putting them down. I wish we could give all these guys a home," she said after injecting an animal.

Dahl said ideally each animal she picked up would have a collar with a license and rabies tag and be spayed or neutered, making it easier to find the owner or adopt the pet out.

"That would be great, but I don't know if it will ever happen on the reservation. Until then, this is the routine," she said while filling up a syringe with the pinkish Euthanasia D used to humanely kill the animals.

Dahl said the grim task has become a daily routine of her job, but as a self-described "dog lover," she still finds it hard to deal a lethal dose to dogs that were never given a fair shake at life, such as the wild puppies she had Tuesday.

"These poor pups, they shouldn't be living in the bushes. They could be sheep herders, like their mother," she said.

The puppies she caught Tuesday all had to be euthanized.

The owner of the maternal dog said she expects the animal to have more pups in about three months. She invited Dahl to come back and pick them up.

Pet owners must take responsibility for their animals.

"It takes plenty of love. Socialize with them every day. You don't just tie them out," Dahl said.

She asked that anyone considering adoption of a pet to research the animal first and be ready for the commitment. Dahl said if people called the shelter before buying or adopting an animal, she would gladly speak with them and help them make an informed decision.

Dahl added she would also like to see owners who have decided they no longer want an animal to drop it off themselves, instead of waiting for her to have time to respond to the call. Such a gesture would likely prevent injury and suffering for the animal.

The result of owners not being responsible for their animals is that Dahl must collect injured and unwanted animals each day, usually returning to the shelter to find another animal on the doorstep of the shelter or running around outside.

She noted animals are often dropped at the door if no one is on duty. Once the animals are collected, Dahl said she must do the humane thing.

"Take this injured one," she said, pointing at a dog so injured it could barely stand. The animal's curly tan fur was stained with blood from an injury suffered days ago. Insects covered the wound.

"What if I wasn't around?" she asked.

A recently approved Navajo Nation appropriation was used to hire an assistant officer to staff the shelter through September.

Once the new Nation budget is approved, Dahl expects to be joined by a full-time officer, whom she said should help her catch up on the backlog of calls.

Still, she said, if more people took the time to consider what was involved with pet ownership, she wouldn't be nearly three months behind in responding to calls.

"I wouldn't have to come out," she said. "But if people aren't responsible, it punishes the dog. They're living on the street, attacking livestock. Dogs don't know (when they're in violation), they can't read the laws."