

THE MAUI NEWS

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Opponents unleash criticism of proposed ban on pit bulls

Critics: Don't target dogs, rein in owners

By MELISSA TANJI, Staff Writer

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KAHULUI - A bill to ban pit bulls in Hawaii is opposed by an owner of the breed, the Maui Humane Society and even a woman whose dog was attacked by a pit bull last year.

They say the real problem lies with the owners, not the dogs.

"You are looking at the wrong end of the leash," said Jocelyn Bouchard, executive director of the Maui Humane Society. "Basically, we need to look at stiffer penalties for dog aggression and . . . better protection for the victims."

The Maui Humane Society is part of the Hawaii Association of Animal Welfare Agencies, which also opposes the bill.

"You can't ban a particular breed of dogs. That doesn't even make sense. That's discrimination," said Jean Southmayd, whose Cavalier King Charles spaniel was bitten by an unleashed pit bull when the dog and Southmayd were walking by a Pukalani home last year.

Southmayd called for stricter enforcement of existing laws covering aggressive dogs. She also suggested immediate impoundment or euthanasia after a dog attacks a dog or a person, depending on the circumstances.

Gina Ursua, a Maui pit bull owner and breeder, said it wouldn't be fair to focus enforcement on dogs.

"They shouldn't punish the dog for an irresponsible owner," she said. "Us as breeders, we take care of our dogs. We know we shouldn't take our dogs out if they aren't on leashes."

In Maui County, dogs are required to be restrained, either in closed yards or on leashes, at all times. Leash law violations are among the most common complaints to the Maui Humane Society.

Ursua is coordinating a rally at noon Saturday in front of the Queen Ka'ahumanu Center to speak out against the bill, which was introduced by Senate President Colleen Hanabusa.

Hanabusa has said she introduced the measure as requested by a constituent, but she didn't expect it to go far with lawmakers, especially as they focus on trying to shore up the state's slumping economy.

The bill, SB 79, has been referred to the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Government Operations. No hearing had been scheduled as of Wednesday, a legislative staffer said.

The measure would make it a misdemeanor to own, possess or sell a pit bull.

The ban would affect pit bull breeds such as the American pit bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier or "any dog displaying the majority of physical traits of any one or more of those breeds."

The bill would authorize impoundment and forfeiture of the animal if the measure became law.

Ursua, who owns Pure Breed Kennels on Maui, called the bill "very wide" because it includes mixed-breed pit bulls.

Although Ursua knows it is unlikely the bill will pass, she said rallies are being held statewide to show lawmakers what kind of opposition there is to the bill if they do consider it in the future.

Article Photos



Ursua family photo
The Ursua family's pit bull Tiny pulls a cart during a Hawaii's Strongest Dog Competition. Gina Ursua is coordinating a sign-waving rally Saturday to oppose proposed legislation that would ban pit bulls in Hawaii.

Fact Box

RALLY

Who: Opponents of a proposed ban on pit bulls in Hawaii

What: A sign-holding rally

When: Noon Saturday

Where: Kaahumanu Avenue, in front of Queen Ka'ahumanu Center

More information: Contact Gina Ursua at 463-0784 or send e-mail to mauipurebreedpits@yahoo.com

Ursua said she has already gathered 350 signatures against the bill at one meeting on Maui.

Bouchard said having a breed ban might require Maui Humane Society officials, who are already understaffed, to go door to door rounding up pit bulls.

The Puunene shelter already is crowded with animals, she said.

* Melissa Tanji can be reached at mtanji@mauinews.com.

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