There are two issues on which all dog lovers agree. First, dogs deserve a life in a safe, caring, and healthy environment. Second, those who treat dogs in a negligent or cruel manner should be held accountable.

The American Kennel Club (AKC) takes a strong line on animal cruelty, including implementing a policy that suspends AKC privileges for anyone convicted of animal cruelty involving dogs. The AKC is also the only registry that has a significant Investigations and Inspections program to ensure that people who register litters with the AKC raise their dogs in a humane manner.

The AKC works to ensure that the rights of responsible owners and breeders are protected and that anyone—regardless of the number of dogs they own—who treats a dog negligently or cruelly is held responsible for such actions.

What is a Responsible Breeder?

One of the most effective ways to ensure that dogs are placed in safe, loving environments is to support responsible dog breeders. Local communities should consider responsible breeders an asset, as they are in a unique position to mentor new dog owners and provide advice and detailed information about the dogs they own and sell.

Responsible breeders are experts in their breed and know the pedigree of the dogs they sell. They can tell potential buyers about the temperament, health, and other characteristics unique to the puppy they are considering. Many breeders devote their entire lives to developing a line or pedigree of dogs that meet specific temperament, performance, and health standards. Many also breed dogs for specific purposes, such as hunting, search and rescue, therapy, and assistance for the disabled.

When responsible breeders sell a puppy, they ensure these dogs are placed in good homes by implementing a screening process for potential buyers and following up after the purchase. Breeders often take dogs back if they are not in an ideal situation and place them in new homes, as in the case of “Bo”, the Obama family’s Portuguese Water Dog.

Most of the AKC national breed parent clubs have rescue programs for their breeds. Parent club rescues are often comprised of AKC breeder volunteers who work with local animal control officers or individual owners to ensure dogs are not abandoned in shelters, but rather placed in safe, loving environments.

Being a responsible dog breeder is truly a labor of love that comes with a significant price tag. Responsible dog breeders breed because they love their chosen breed(s) and are willing to dedicate their lives and resources to raising quality dogs.

More than a Numbers Game

Every profession from accountants and lawyers to doctors and teachers has a few “bad apples” that tarnish the reputation of an otherwise respectable profession. Unfortunately, dog breeding is no exception.

Thankfully, these few irresponsible breeders comprise a very small minority of an otherwise unique and special profession. Those who do breed or care for dogs in an irresponsible or cruel manner must be punished under the law, but the term “irresponsible” must be carefully defined.

An unfortunate but common trend is to equate the term “irresponsible” with the number of dogs—particularly females—someone owns. This assumption often occurs among individuals with little knowledge or expertise in animal husbandry, genetics or best practices in animal care. In fact, keeping multiple dogs and maintaining proper care and conditions demonstrates a commitment to proper care and genetic diversity. The number of animals owned has never correlated with the level of care.

Many agriculture groups have partnered with the AKC throughout the United States to fight legislation that places an arbitrary cap on animal ownership. They know that historically as well as today, the great kennels—like the great horse farms or cattle ranches—have maintained and provided excellent care to large numbers of animals. Just as there are excellent owners of 100 dogs, there are negligent owners of one dog.
There is no question that those who treat dogs in an inhumane manner should be punished. Each of the 50 states, as well as the United States Code, outlaw animal negligence and cruelty. When tragic stories of animal cruelty and irresponsible breeding come to light, they almost always result in charges under existing law being brought against the individual or business responsible.

The problem is not an absence of laws, but rather a lack of enforcement or the resources to properly enforce existing laws. Many states and local communities simply do not have the manpower or money necessary to adequately enforce existing laws.

There have been many attempts across the country to further regulate dog breeders. These include requiring warrantless inspections of private homes without probable cause, as well as impractical and arbitrary standards of care that may not be in the best interest of dogs. Not only do such provisions violate the rights of responsible, law-abiding citizens, they are also ineffective and unenforceable—and in some cases may even harm dogs. The problem is more complex than simply creating new laws—it requires the ability and will to enforce the laws against negligence and cruelty that are already on the books. A “quick fix” of adding new laws will not change or improve a lack of enforcement and may only divert resources from much-needed enforcement operations.

At the federal level, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has regularly strengthened the standards for humane care and treatment of dogs and other animals owned by those regulated by the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The AKC supports the strong enforcement of the AWA, as well as an increase in the personnel and capacity of USDA to enforce the AWA.

An Effective Solution

Breeder and owner responsibility cannot be defined by establishing arbitrary ownership limits or unenforceable breeding requirements. Instead, responsibility should be defined by the quality of care given to the animals. This is why the American Kennel Club works with dog owners, breeders, and community leaders throughout the country to educate the public about responsible dog ownership.

The AKC also encourages responsible breeding practices by supporting educational symposia for breeders and competitive dog shows and other events where top breeders showcase and compete with the best of their breeding programs. The AKC Canine Health Foundation has allocated millions of dollars to research studies focusing on helping dogs live longer, healthier lives.

Where legislative fixes are needed, the AKC is pleased to assist in bringing community leaders and responsible breeders together to create positive, effective solutions. For example, Ohio lawmakers sought over several legislative sessions to close loopholes and clarify breeding and care standards for dogs. The AKC worked with responsible dog owners, breeders, and key legislators and enforcement authorities to identify the real issues. Together, this group finally succeeded in creating a strong, clear law that provided reasonable guidelines and enforcement provisions.

For over 135 years, the AKC has been dedicated to well-being of dogs. We support and value the responsible owners and breeders who breed and raise our cherished pets and beloved working dogs. Responsible breeders are an important asset and educational resource in our communities. Through educational programs and enforcement of existing laws, we can punish those who harm animals while recognizing that responsible breeders who devote their lives to their dogs are part of the solution, not the problem.