

**Submission
No 136**

COMPANION ANIMAL BREEDING PRACTICES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Guide Dogs NSW/ACT

Submission to the Inquiry on Companion Animal Breeding Practices in New South Wales

As an accredited member of the International Guide Dog Federation, Assistance Dogs International and Guide Dogs Australia, and in recognition of the extraordinary value of our dog, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT adheres to best practice in our breeding and training of prospective Guide Dogs.

Whilst Guide Dogs NSW/ACT is not a commercial breeder, we continue to invest a substantial amount of time and resources in developing a world class breeding and training facility which produces Guide Dogs to assist people who are blind or vision impaired achieve optimum independence and mobility.

Since our inception 40 years ago, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT has progressed from purchasing our Labrador pups from select reputable breeders, to producing our own breeding stock and pups with the objective of breeding the healthiest dogs possible with optimal temperaments to suit the requirements of being a Guide Dog.

Our selective breeding practices maximise desirable Guide Dog characteristics such as confidence, concentration and willingness and minimise undesirable characteristics such as dog distraction, excitability and anxiety. This is important to ensure the safety of the Guide Dog handler.

The behavioural advantages of our purpose bred Guide Dogs becomes clear when a trained Guide Dog is observed in their working environment, out in the community.

By only breeding dogs with exceptional health, our selective breeding programs also minimise the prevalence or severity of common Labrador health conditions such as hip dysplasia, osteochondritis and skin allergies.

The objective is for our Guide Dogs to have improved health, longer working life spans and to cost less in veterinary fees over time. Guide Dogs Australia's participation and investment in cutting edge research promotes sustained best practice and ensures that the benefits of the selective breeding programs will continue to grow into the future.

Another vital focus of our selective breeding programs is the maintenance of sufficient variance in temperamental and physical characteristics within our dog population. Some Guide Dog users require a dog that is higher in initiative and comfortable in new and noisy surroundings while others may require a more compliant, easy-going dog for trips to the local shopping centre or other local destinations. Dogs also naturally walk at different speeds and this ideally needs to be similar to the Guide Dog handler's walking speed.

Variance provides optimum choice and flexibility when it is time to match the right dog to the right person. This choice and flexibility enables Guide Dogs NSW/ACT to make highly accurate matches so our Guide Dog handlers get the best mobility experience possible. Breeding lines are monitored carefully to ensure maximum genetic variance and definitely no interbreeding.

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These behavioural and health advantages are achieved by choosing only the best dogs to use as breeding stock, and also by accessing genetic material from sophisticated and established Guide Dog organisations from the US, UK, Europe and Australasia.

It would take around 10 years to significantly scale-up a breeding program's production capabilities due to the need to retain the highest quality pups to add to the breeding stock while appropriately retiring breeding animals and continuing to produce sufficient numbers of high quality Guide Dogs to meet client demand.

The benefits of our breeding programme in temperament, health and overall wellbeing are a vastly different to some of the abhorrent practices we have heard occur in unregulated and mercenary 'puppy farms' where the primary motivation is monetary and certainly not the welfare of the breeding dogs or the temperamental or health ramifications for the pups. At Guide Dogs NSW/ACT our motivation is the opposite; all Guide Dogs are provided free-of-charge to people with vision loss and our organisation assumes a large degree of responsibility for the dog's health and effective and safe guiding for the life of the dog. It is in Guide Dogs NSW/ACT's interests to ensure the dogs provided are as healthy as possible and the best Guide Dogs possible.

Interbreeding of genetic lines has led to well published and costly conformation weaknesses leading to hip dysplasia and other significant health impacts for the dogs as they grow.

This unfortunately is apparently also of little concern to the breeders as the animal is no longer their responsibility when sold. They know that most purchasers will quickly form a bond with their individual dog, necessitating considerable expense for them to 'fix' their beloved pet.

As such, we strongly support greater oversight within the commercial canine breeding industry.

In addition to the animal welfare and health considerations, the impact of an uncontrolled aggressive dog attack on a highly valuable and docile Guide Dog can be catastrophic with the substantial financial impact of having to prematurely retire a dog which is highly trained at great expense, but more devastating is the trauma inflicted to both the dog and its handler.

Excepting for age, dog attack is the primary reason that Guide or Assistance Dogs have to be prematurely retired worldwide.

In addition to the required registration and transparent regulation and inspection of breeders and their facilities, we agree with the RSPCA's position that puppies should no longer be able to be purchased through pet stores.

Arguably, this will reduce the risk of an impulse purchase of a 'cute' and appealing puppy with the resulting regret when the lifetime commitment and responsibility of dog ownership dawns on the purchaser once the puppy 'cuteness' has passed and the possibility of abuse or abandonment of the older animal. Prevention of sale of puppies through pet stores will also end questionable practices in the treatment of the pups while in the care of store and the outcome for pups not sold while they are young and 'cute'.

Should the Committee require further expansion or clarification on any aspect of the above, please do not hesitate to contact us.

END