

WOLF DOG OWNER FIGHTING LEGAL CHALLENGES



Loki, a wolf dog, hangs out on the couch with Jill Baker, 12, one of several children who share a home with Loki in West Point. DANA M. NICHOLS/The Record

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WEST POINT - Cathie Depner's dogs are all vaccinated. They spend their days frolicking with children. Strangers coming through the front door get their hands licked.

But Depner and her family fear they may soon face the heartbreak of either sending the animals out of Calaveras County or having them forcibly removed.

The problem, in the eyes of the law, is that Depner's pets are wolf dogs.

"I would die for him," the 54-year-old Depner said of Loki, an 18-month-old wolf dog with thick white hair.

The breed is not recognized by the American Kennel Club, but wolf dogs have been around for decades.

The hybrid dogs often look a lot like huskies, malamutes, German shepherds, Norwegian elkhounds or Samoyeds.

Wolf dog breeders say their animals have wolf ancestry, possibly as recent as a few decades ago.

Scientists consider wolves and dogs to be one species. But the original domestication of dogs - and their separation from wolves - happened about 100,000 years ago, according to Robert K. Wayne, a University of California, Los Angeles, evolutionary geneticist who has studied wolves, dogs and other related animals for decades.

Depner admits that she is relying on the breeder who sold her Loki for her estimate that he is "65 percent wolf."

For the same reason, she believes that Lakota, a female wolf dog she also owns, is 50 percent wolf.

"There is no guarantee that there is any wolf in that dog anyway," Depner said.

Depner's husband, John Allen, agreed.

"Wolf dogs are a myth. Basically there hasn't been any fresh (wolf) blood since the 1960s or 1970s," Allen said.

People who care for wild animals generally must get state permits to do so. In California, that includes a permit from the state Department of Fish and Game.

Myth or not, the breed is popular. Depner admits she has been breeding and promoting the sale of wolf dogs on the Internet (hybridwolfpup.com). The puppies go for \$700 each. "I have waiting lists up to 2013," Depner said.

A few months ago, someone contacted Calaveras County Animal Services and reported that Depner was breeding wolf dogs.

Depner thinks she may have been turned in by someone she "unfriended" on Facebook.

The appearance of an animal-control officer at her door was a problem because an animal with any wolf blood in its veins is considered wildlife and cannot be kept as a pet.

Another legal problem: Since state law classifies wolves as a separate species, and since the rabies vaccine used for domestic dogs hasn't been tested on wild wolves, the vaccine is considered unproven for wolf dogs.

Depner said an officer with county Animal Services has told her she will soon receive a citation for having an animal that cannot be vaccinated, and she will have to get rid of her wolf dogs within seven days of receiving the citation.

Sgt. Laurie Murray, who oversees Animal Services, June 26 asked Calaveras County supervisors if they would consider legalizing wolf dogs on the theory it is easier to manage problems that way rather than driving wolf dog owners underground.

A narrow board majority opposed the idea. Depner said she plans to appeal directly to the board herself.

Depner said she can't afford an attorney, and can't afford to sell her house and move away from her job as a cook in West Point. And she doesn't want to exile Loki and Lakota.

"They would have to shoot me to get my dogs," she said.

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