

MBR Acres Beagle Concerns

I am writing on behalf of the officers, committees and members of the UK's two national and six regional registered beagle breed clubs, to express our very real concerns regarding the welfare of the beagles bred and reared at MBR Acres at Wyton, Huntingdon.

Whilst many of the activities of our community are centred around the breeding and exhibition of pure bred beagles, we are also dedicated to the maintenance and improvement of the health and quality of life for all beagles. Amongst our many hundreds of members are exhibitors, licensed breeders and those who feel their lives are enhanced by the companionship of this unique breed. We are therefore in the privileged position of having a pool of knowledge and experience regarding beagles second to none and cannot stay silent when we are aware of their abuse and exploitation.

MBR Acres is owned by the US based global breeding company Marshall Bioresources which breeds up to 2,000 beagle puppies each year at this industrial type site. The company whose mission statement is to "breed thriving dogs for research" proudly posts PR videos showing beagles enjoying enrichment with toys, and puppies being bottle fed and monitored closely by caring staff. However, this is in stark contrast with the reality of the actual lives experienced by the beagles unfortunate to be bred and spend their early weeks there. I have read in detail the Home Office Code of Practice for the Housing and Care of Animals Bred, Supplied or Used for Scientific Purposes and it is clear that conditions at MBR Acres do not reach a key outcome in the Executive Summary i.e. "To promote good animal welfare through the provision of consistent, high quality care and accommodation". The following are the main issues identified as our major concerns.

STAFFING LEVELS

I note the guidance in Section 6 Chapter 6 which sounds very laudable but I find it incomprehensible that it begins with "It is recommended that the number of staff is adequate to maintain the size of breeding colonies and good standards of husbandry and care". Note please "recommended" and "adequate". As far as I can see there are no stipulations regarding staffing numbers in proportion to dogs on premises and it is only a recommendation not a requirement. Does this not leave the door wide open for a company such as MBR Acres to be able to operate with the minimum number of staff? Amongst our

members we have many who are licensed to breed beagles and they are, rightly, subject to very strict conditions which are clearly stated and enforced. I refer you to Dog breeding licensing: statutory guidance for local authorities, which states (section 4.1) that "Sufficient numbers of people who are competent for the purpose must be available to provide a level of care that ensures that the welfare needs of all the animals are met" Furthermore it proceeds to state that "Each member of staff should have 20 dogs or less to care for".

The number of staff currently observed to be working in this facility engaged in the "care" of the beagles is 10 or 11 from Monday to Friday and 6 at weekends and public holidays. This handful of workers are responsible for the provision of the "high quality of care" referred to earlier, of 1000 + beagles including many whelping bitches and young puppies and those in the bleeding colony. In addition to replenishing food and water, removing faeces and urine soaked matter and cleansing the pens, it is also considered most important to (according to Home Office legislation) "take into account the additional time for the essential human contact required especially for pups ...". Those of us who have spent so much of our lives rearing and looking after beagles know that is absolutely impossible for that number of staff to provide care of an acceptable standard—the numbers just don't add up!

STAFFING—HOURS ON SITE

In addition to our very real concerns regarding staffing numbers, we find it inconceivable that a huge breeding resource such as this does not enjoy 24/7 staffing! The Camp Beagle team closely monitors and videos the comings and goings of workers so we have it on good authority that "care" staff are only on site from 8 am to 4 pm weekdays and from 7.30 to 11 am weekends and public holidays which means in effect that on occasions the beagles are regularly left unattended for around 20 + hours. This system would be bad enough anyway but when you take into account that it is essentially a breeding facility the situation takes on an even darker dimension. Although beagles are generally easy whelpers, complications can and do occur even when the mothers are given the best care and attention. We all have experienced situations, for example when a puppy is stuck in the birth canal or cases of primary or secondary uterine inertia which, without timely intervention and possibly veterinary support, might well have resulted in the death of puppies and even the mother. One really wonders how many puppies and mothers are lost because of being unattended and why a company whose business depends on breeding "healthy, happy puppies" is so reluctant to invest in their needs. Small or weak puppies may well need extra

attention and care to ensure their survival. I mentioned earlier the MBR video showing a puppy being bottle fed but clearly this is a misrepresentation of the true nature of the establishment when you take into account staffing levels and presence.

Again, in contrast, those licensed by Local Authorities must observe dogs regularly throughout the day and, where there is a litter, must be checked at least once in person even during non-working hours.

EXERCISE AND ENRICHMENT

The Home Office Code of Practice states the need for “exercise to allow additional opportunities to experience a complex and varied environment” and furthermore recommends dog treats, toys and items for chewing.

Having so much experience of beagles we know only too well how important enrichment and exercise is to the breed. They are an active, intelligent breed that thrive on stimulation and who become bored very easily! However, at the MBR factory they have no access to any outside areas and are confined to pens with sleeping platforms but no beds or bedding. Video footage shows the only attempt at enrichment as being the attachment of a red plastic ball but no toys, chewables or items of comfort whatsoever. Please explain to me how this type of environment, which the puppies endure from when they leave their mother to when they leave for their final destination, can possibly be conducive to the raising of the “happy, healthy puppies” advertised by MBR Acres.

There are other features with which we would like to take issue but I hope that I have made clear where are our main concerns are focussed.

However, despite the fact being that the practices at MBR Acres clearly do not meet the stated aims of the Home Office Code of Conduct in the ways identified above, surprisingly the Inspection Reports state otherwise. Within them there are mentioned no concerns relating to the dog`s welfare whatsoever but only concern at cracked paint! Can inspectors genuinely be satisfied that “adequate staffing “ means leaving vulnerable bitches and puppies unattended for up to 20 hours, no access to outside areas leads to a “complex and varied environment” or the requirement for “enrichment” is met by a lone plastic ball? If this is considered acceptable by the Home Office could it please be justified as to why the beagles in this establishment are allowed to be treated in a way in which we would never want, or be, allowed to treat ours?

Although these types of establishments are required to be inspected at least once a year, the last inspection was carried out in April 2024 so, at the time of writing this, an inspection is overdue already by 4 months.

Maybe it's because they are scheduled to die anyway that their lives are devalued so it is not felt worth the time and expense to rear them properly and give them at least a taste of a good life. However, if as claimed, their purpose is so integral to mankind surely they deserve better than this.

My colleagues and I would really appreciate you taking time reading this and we hope for an early reply as not only our beagle community but the wider world of dog lovers, incorporating literally thousands, is becoming increasingly aware of and concerned regarding the conditions at MBR Acres.

Maureen Henningsson-Dundas

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The following organisations have pledged their support for this letter.

Beagle Association

Beagle Club

Four Counties Beagle Club

Northern and Midland Counties Beagle Club

Scottish Beagle Club

Southern Counties Beagle Club

Welsh Beagle Club

West Mercia Beagle Club