

How Curious – Why is Oklahoma sending thousands of rescue dogs and cats out of state?

MUSIC: How Curious theme

Rachel Hopkin Script

Hi. I'm Rachel Hopkin and welcome to How Curious.

FX

Sound of tin opening and kitten food being put onto plate.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I'm feeding a couple of my foster kittens: Button and Piecrust. Piecrust sometimes growls when he eats. It's adorable.

FX

Kittens eating; Piecrust growling

Rachel Hopkin Script

I've been fostering rescue kittens for Norman Animal Welfare for a couple of years.

Usually I keep the little darlings till they weigh two pounds, when they're ready to be vaccinated and fixed – i.e. spayed or neutered – and put up for adoption here. However, some time back, I was asked to bring my then charges in early because they'd been “tagged for transport”.

What this meant, I learnt, was that they were to be put on flight loaded up with Oklahoma rescue dogs and cats and flown to shelters in select other states where their chances of finding a forever home and quickly were much higher.

For Norman Animal Welfare, this is a regular occurrence. Every 6-8 weeks or so, the center's staff start prepping the animals in the wee small hours of the morning to get them ready for the flight that's operated by the non-profit Dog is My Copilot. I went to see this happening a short while back.

FX FROM FLIGHT PREP AT NORMAN ANIMAL WELFARE.

Lots of dogs barking. Door slamming.

Rachel-in-Situ

Wow, this is quite the operation.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The main area of activity was a loading zone to the side of the building.

Rachel-in-Situ

So the animals are all brought up here one by one and put in crates.

Kellee Robertson

Yes. All the crates have to have blankets and towels in them. “Live Animal” stickers are required. And then once they’re in the crate, we will zip tie the door so that they can’t escape once they’re on the airplane. We had one, it was about three flights ago, I guess, it was in a crate like this, and it chewed through the plastic and got out on the plane.

Rachel-in-Situ

Fortunately it doesn’t sound like you’ve had any bad things happen when that’s happened?

Kellee Robertson

No, we won’t send any dogs that have behavior problems, they’re friendly with people, they’re friendly with other dogs.

FX CONTINUES

Dogs barking, cats meowing.

Rachel-in-Situ

And they’re not given any kind of sedative or anything like that, are they?

Female NAW worker

No, not usually.

Kellee Robertson

If they do have real high anxiety, we might give them something. Obviously she does not have high anxiety.

Rachel Hopkin Script

We’re talking about a delightfully chilled out looking Labrador called Nelly.

Rachel-in-Situ

[Laughing] She seems very laid back.

Kellee Robertson

She just doesn’t want to stand up.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Overseeing all of this is Kellee Robertson, who has been the manager of Norman Animal Welfare since 2022.

Kellee Robertson

When I first started here, I knew that animals were transported and I reached out to Dog is My Copilot.

Rachel Hopkin Script

That’s the non-profit founded by animal loving pilot and former surgeon Peter Rork.

Kellee Robertson

I got in touch with their flight coordinator Lynette. She explained the whole process to me, told me that I had to find rescue partners that will accept my dogs and that Dog is My Copilot is the hub that gets them where they’re going.

Rachel Hopkin Script

It is mostly dogs, but sometimes cats too.

Kellee Robertson

Now we have multiple rescues that will take dogs off the plane lands in Colorado, then goes on to Oregon, then sometimes goes on to Washington State.

Rachel Hopkin Script

In fact, I learnt, animal rescue operations from all around Oklahoma are also working urgently and in myriad ways to transport animals out of state.

Cynthia Armstrong

These shelters are all experiencing serious overcrowding ...

Rachel Hopkin Script

Cynthia Armstrong is the Oklahoma Senior State Director for Humane World for Animals.

Cynthia Armstrong

... to the point where they start thinking about transport out of state in an effort to prevent needless euthanasia of healthy adoptable animals. So it's a real mission. They're in combat mode all the time. It's a lot of responsibility, it's a lot of lives that they're trying to save.

Rachel Hopkin Script

And it really is a lot of lives. University of Oklahoma professors – anthropologist Lori Jervis and sociologist Laura Bray – have been researching this subject for several years.

Laura Bray

What we found in 2022 was over 26000 shelter animals transported out of Oklahoma which is two out of every five, so nearly 40% of all shelter animals in the state. 94% were dogs, only 6% were cats, and they were going to 34 different states and most of those were heading north.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I was so intrigued. I'd just assumed everywhere was in the same boat vis-à-vis rescue animals – i.e. that there are always far more needing homes than there are homes available, but evidently not. Miriam Kelly, who runs Desiderata Rescue out of Seminole, used to live in Washington State, one of the regular places that receives Oklahoma's animals, and she was emphatic.

Miriam Kelly

It does not compare. Almost every day there's a litter of puppies dumped somewhere within a 20 mile radius of where I am, but if you ask people in the south here, they're completely oblivious. They think it is normal, this is how it is everywhere, and it's like no, it's not. It's not normal to find litters of puppies dumped on dirt roads to starve or to be eaten by coyotes. And that happens all over the state every single day. Yes, Washington's not perfect, the northern states aren't perfect, but you just can't compare. It's like comparing apples to oranges.

Rachel Hopkin Script

It's perhaps not so unusual then that my fosters, Button and Piecrust, were found in a box filled with 20 or so felines of all different ages by the side of a road.

So what is going on here that's leading to such a pressing overpopulation of cats and dogs?

This isn't an easy question to answer and there are definitely multiple factors involved. Dr. Tyler is the vet at Norman Animal Welfare and she explained how Oklahoma's comparatively warm climate has an impact.

Dr. Amy Tyler

Obviously in the much colder winter environment, the animals could potentially suffer hypothermia, and if not, the stress of the colder weather would make them more likely to become ill or have other unfortunately consequences.

Rachel Hopkin Script

In other words, animals born in the winter months in more northerly states have a lower survival rate. In addition, although Oklahoma's southerly location doesn't affect canine breeding seasons ...

Dr. Amy Tyler

... for cats it's different, they come into season based on hours of daylight, they need 10 hours of daylight to be in season, so the number of kittens that can be born within a season are going to be higher in the southern states.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The fact that Oklahoma is one of the more economically challenged states in the U.S. is also a factor. Here's Laura Bray again.

Professor Laura Bray

In places that are poorer, you do tend to have more human problems, so more situations where people have to surrender their animals for different reasons.

Cynthia Armstrong

We also have an existing statute ...

Rachel Hopkin Script

Cynthia Armstrong again

Cynthia Armstrong

... that requires confinement of all animals except dogs and cats.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Of course, this wouldn't be such an issue if these unconfined dogs and cats were spayed/neutered and therefore unable to reproduce. Everyone that spoke with me for this program pointed over and again to the importance of spay neuter and the widespread lack of access to this resource.

This includes Annetta Kelley and Tara McCauley of the Lucky Paws Dog House in Tishimingo. They're operating in a rural area where they're on the front line of this issue.

Tara McCauley

Spay and neuter is the only solution to all of this because really before we got involved, there were dogs running everywhere. So that's why we're trying, every Wednesday, if we don't have appointments for the dogs in our rescue to get spayed and neutered, Annetta will take community dogs.

Rachel Hopkin Script

They have three standing appointments for spay neuter operations per week with a vet in Ardmore which is 45 minutes away.

Annetta Kelly

I figured out a lot of people probably couldn't get their dogs spayed and neutered because they have to drop them off at 8 o'clock in the morning and pick them up between 2 and 3 in the afternoon. A lot of people at work can't take off to go and do that. You know, I have people reach out to me from Dennison, Texas. They'll bring their dogs up here so that I can take them to Ardmore.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Tara and Annetta have just indicated multiple issues that are prevalent across rural Oklahoma and beyond, including limited access to animal care resources – either because of lack of money or availability or both. Here's Laura Bray again.

Laura Bray

A lot of the rural places throughout the state, it is like an animal service vacuum. I think it's about a third of the 77 counties have no shelter at all. There might not be low cost spay neuter within hours of them. So some of these rural places, if they do have a shelter, they might not have money to spay and neuter the animals that come into their care, so they're releasing them back into the community without being spayed and neutered. So there's definitely a problem with the infrastructure.

SEGUE

Lori Jervis

One impression that I came away with though ...

Rachel Hopkin Script

This is Lori Jervis

Lori Jervis

... is that there can be cultures of spay and neuter, more or less spay and neuter, and that there are parts of the country that have luckily and through a lot of work instituted a general expectation among the public that we are going to fix our animals, and I don't think as much of that has happened here. I don't think we're quite there. But again, what's responsible for that? Is

it education? Is it money? Is it culture? That's part of what we're trying to tease through ourselves.

Rachel Hopkin Script

A number of people who spoke with me for this program told me they'd encountered resistance to the idea of spay neuter coming particularly from men. However Kim Schlittler, who ran a spay neuter assistance program in central Oklahoma for nearly two decades, saw a change in this regard over the years it was in operation.

Kim Schlittler

Originally it was application based and almost all the applications came from women, and I could see a shift over the years that more men were applying, so that was very encouraging to me.

Rachel-in-Situ

Have you any idea what was bringing about that shift?

Kim Schlittler

I don't. Maybe they just realized that I've got a female cat and it keeps screaming every time it goes into heat or the cat's spraying all over the place or the dog's getting a bit aggressive or I have male dogs trying to get to my female dog in heat in the back yard. Maybe I should do something about that.

Rachel Hopkin Script

There are indeed multiple advantages to spaying and neutering including behavioral ones. And there are strong medical pluses too, as Dr Tyler laid out for me.

Dr. Amy Tyler

When an animal is spayed, we take the ovaries and uterus, and when an animal is neutered, we remove the testicles, so any of the diseases that would affect those organs, those problems are eliminated. So we're talking about ovarian cysts, ovarian tumors, uterine cancer, uterine infections, testicular tumors, prostatic diseases.

Rachel Hopkin Script

For anyone ready to get their animals spayed or neutered, then comes the issue of finding a place to do it at an affordable cost or even for free, if you're lucky enough to live within a municipality with a shelter that offers this. For example, Norman Animal Welfare makes this service available to low-income residents of the city. Kim Schlittler has compiled a great resource in this regard.

Kim Schlittler

Now that I'm retired, one of the things I always wanted to do was put together a list of spay neuter clinics in Oklahoma.

Rachel Hopkin Script

She's documented over fifty.

Kim Schlittler

That includes one in Arkansas, one in Texas. If there's not one in their county, look for somewhere close to their counties. They're going to have to travel.

Rachel Hopkin Script

There's a link to this document on this episode web page – search for KGOU and How Curious. The waiting lists at some of these places can be long so it's best to apply as soon as possible.

During the course of making this program, I happened to meet two people who'd recently acquired a dog, both from rather sketchy sounding breeders rather than a shelter. I asked Kellee Robertson if intentional breeding was compounding the overpopulation issue here .

Kellee Robertson

If there wasn't that, we wouldn't have the problem that we have.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Of course, not all breeders are created equal. Kellee highlighted as problematic those who see it as a means to make a quick buck.

Kellee Robertson

They see a fad or trending type breed of dog that people are willing to pay high prices for and they just think in their head, "I'm going to get me a female and breed her, have a litter of puppies." Those are some of the most dangerous ones because these dogs, they're pure bred dogs but they're not well bred dogs and they end up with a lot of health issues. And a lot of times those dogs will end up in shelters.

SEGUE

Cynthia Armstrong

I think not having puppy selling pet stores in places where you already have overcrowding is very important.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Cynthia Armstrong. She told me that Petland is a puppy selling pet store chain.

Cynthia Armstrong

Recently we had a Petland franchisee move into the state and open a store in Tulsa and the other in Oklahoma City, and that is because the city where he was operating in Illinois passed a municipal ordinance banning puppy selling pet stores, so he moved. So yes, that contributes.

SEGUE

Professor Lori Jervis

I mean, to really get an overpopulated companion animal population under control, you've got to hit it really hard.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Anthropologist Lori Jervis again.

Professor Lori Jervis

Places that have got it under control, it can't be a half effort. It has to be a full throttle effort, and you've got to have some money behind it, and philanthropy can come in too, it doesn't just all have to be government.

Rachel Hopkin Script

This is what happened in Vinita, Oklahoma, starting in 2014 when Kay Stout took charge of the city's new shelter.

Kay Stout

It's a beautiful \$1.7 million building and I was told that people were waiting to adopt and so when we opened the doors, then everyone would flock in and everything would be adopted and kumbaya. And shortly after we opened, I had all fifty kennels full and nobody was coming in to adopt. So I looked at it from a very business point of view. I came from the corporate world. I've raised too much corn and nobody wants my corn. So we had too much.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Kay knew about adoptable animal transports and was put in touch with a gentleman named Bob at the Dumb Friends League in Colorado.

Kay Stout

I called him and he said "we don't take from shelters." I said "You're going to take from mine." And he said "Okay, I'll give you three chances."

Rachel Hopkin Script

With that tentative go ahead, Kay reached out to two philanthropic families active in the area for help in moving the animals.

Kay Stout

Then eventually we got the bus. We sent 6700 Oklahoma dogs to Colorado. But eventually I looked around and went "wait a minute, we're not filling our kennels anymore" because we were shipping them out so fast. And we were doing spay neuter. We got a Pets for Life program.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Pets for Life is a Humane World for Animals program which includes the provision of community wide veterinary care and pet supplies.

Kay Stout

That changed everything because Pets for Life meant that if it lived in the town and it barked or meowed, we'd fix it. So now you don't have the dogs coming into the shelter. So we started bringing in animals from rescues and shelters throughout Oklahoma.

Rachel Hopkin Script

As communities elsewhere across Oklahoma continue to struggle, animal transport provides a literal lifeline. It's not without criticisms – one of which is that it leaves the sending shelters vulnerable should their out of state partners have to reduce or end their receiving capacity for whatever reason. In the meantime, it can offer – in the words of Kellee Robertson – a safety net that allows staff to make thoughtful decisions, not desperate ones.

As I joined the Norman Animal Welfare staff to cheer off a flight full of their animals, the sense of relief was almost palpable.

FX

SOUND OF FLIGHT DEPARTING, CHEERING

But two Oklahoma rescues that won't be leaving here any time soon are Button and Piecrust – my two little former fosters.

FX – CATS PURRING

I simply became too attached and decided to adopt them. They join Mushroom – my first foster fail and another Oklahoma rescue – plus Figlet who hails from Ohio. They for make a very happy quartet.

Thanks to them and to all of the contributors to this episode, including the many whose voices we didn't hear. I've put a complete list of credits plus various resources relating to today's show on our web page. Search for KGOU and How Curious.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

As ever, if you have an idea for a future episode, please drop us a line at curious@kgou.org.

THEME MUSIC FADES UP AND ENDS.