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Pet Population Mushrooming, Worsening City Stray Problem

IT looks like we have too many pets which don't belong to anybody. At least no one seems to be responsible for them.

Within recent weeks, the Oklahoma City Council has considered a more effective law to control dogs and the City-County Health Department has declared that the large number of stray cats amounts to a dangerous health hazard.

Just about everybody enjoys a cuddly kitten or a frisky puppy, and it isn't hard for youngsters to persuade parents that they need a pet. Parents may give in because they had pets, or because they wanted pets they never had.

It has been estimated that 60 per cent of the 70 million American households keep some kind of pet, including 350 million fish, 22 million birds and 8 million horses. They also have 125 million miscellaneous pets, including snakes, turtles, rabbits, hamsters, monkeys and jungle cats.

Dogs and cats are the most popular, with estimates running well over 100 million. That's a dog or cat for every two people, and they reproduce a lot faster. They're gaining on us, with 3,000 dogs and cats born per hour, compared to about 415 human babies born in the same period.

Increases in crime have encouraged people to keep dogs as guards. When owners discover that it may cost as much as \$100 a month to feed a Great Dane or other big eater, they may decide the risk of bodily harm is less than the expense.

In the past, pets could be fed on table scraps, with owners not worrying about where they roamed. Times have changed. Household pets now consume close to 4 million tons of

food a year. This retails for some \$2.5 billion, and pet owners spend about that much more on accessories.

It is in the area of freedom that the public interest becomes involved. City laws require dogs to be kept behind fences or on leashes. A drive along almost any street will reveal that it is not fully enforced. There aren't enough dog catchers, and police seldom volunteer for dog nuisance duty.

Cats aren't subject to such restrictions. Owners turn them out for exercise with no control over where they go or what they do. Many kill birds at nearby feeding places, and may come into contact with stray disease-infected cats.

The law requires dogs to be immunized against rabies but nothing can be done, apparently, about strays except to capture them and take them to animal shelters for disposal.

The same applies to neutering to prevent reproduction. One drug company has introduced an oral contraceptive for dogs, without noticeable results so far. Another firm was reported to be testing use of birth control drugs in pet foods.

Not the least important aspect of the population explosion on America's great pet animal farm is the cost of disposing of those that are diseased, neglected or don't have a home. This has been calculated at over \$200 million a year.

This doesn't include investments by pet owners who pay to have their beloved pets interred in perpetual care cemeteries, with epitaphs carved in permanent monuments so that others may be aware of the sentimental value of a pet.