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Rspca Seeks Tough Controls On Pit Bulls

THE SUNDAY AGE

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Michael Magazanik

SEMEN from champion fighting dogs overseas is being smuggled into Australia to avoid the ban on importing American pit bull terriers, according to the RSPCA.

The semen is then used to impregnate local dogs and the offspring can be worth thousands of dollars on the black market, the RSPCA's senior inspector in Victoria, Mr Kevin Apostolides, said yesterday.

The claim came ahead of a meeting this week at which the RSPCA will urge the Deputy Premier, Mr Pat McNamara, to crack down on pit bull terriers. At the meeting on Thursday, the RSPCA's president, Dr Hugh Wirth, will ask Mr McNamara, who is also the Agriculture Minister, to declare all pit bulls dangerous dogs, thereby forcing owners to comply with safety measures in the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act.

Pit bulls would then have to be held inside secure pens in the owner's yard and muzzled and leashed when taken off the owner's property. Dangerous dog signs would have to be displayed, and the dogs fitted with warning collars.

But pit bull owners are determined to avoid these restrictions.

They have set up a defence fund to fight moves to crack down on the dog after a recent spate of attacks apparently involving pit bulls or pit bull crosses.

The most recent edition of the American Pit Bull Terrier Club of Australia magazine states: "As a result of the recent bad publicity the breed is receiving, the defence fund has been reintroduced to meet all costs in the fight to keep our breed free of breed-specific laws."

The club's president, Mr Colin Muir, last week said the fund could pay for legal action to fight dog bans, and education of owners and the public.

"The problem is the owners, not the dogs. They are very stable dogs," Mr Muir said.

"But the media make the dog out to be a monster, which in turn makes the dog extremely appealing to every idiot who wants to own the toughest dog in the street to give his ego a boost. That's what makes the myth of the pit bull."

But the RSPCA is adamant that the dog is dangerous, and wants the State Government to act.

The organisation's state director, Mr Peter Barber, said: "They are big, powerful dogs with uncertain behavior. You don't know when they are going to turn around and chew someone up."

Mr Barber said there was a strong case for banning the dogs in the early 1980s, and while it was too late for that now, "they should be treated differently to the average family pet".

Mr Barber said he and Dr Wirth would urge Mr McNamara to amend the law.

Mr Apostolides said dog fighting was widespread, highly organised and lucrative.

He said the RSPCA had seized videotapes of dog fights, but there had been no successful prosecutions. This was because "the criminal element involved know how to evade detection, it is easy to hide because fights can be staged in a living room and there is great intimidation of the people involved".

A spokeswoman for Mr McNamara confirmed that the minister would meet the RSPCA this week and the Government was "taking everything into consideration but nothing is being changed at this stage".

BULLY OF THE TOWN.

* American pit bull terriers are heavily built, powerful with a blocky head, prominent cheeks and jaw and a muscular body.

* Males weigh up to 27 kilograms and females up to 23 kilograms, but dogs have been known to grow to 45 kilograms.

* It was bred in Britain during the 19th century by mixing bulldogs and terriers to produce the "bull and terrier", known for its aggression to other dogs, bravery, high pain threshold, and willingness to fight to the death.

* Introduced into the USA, it was recognised as the American pit bull terrier in about 1900.

* Today the name is often applied to a range of breeds and cross breeds, including bull terriers, bulldogs, bullmastiffs, and Staffordshire bull terriers.

* The Federal Government banned importation of the breed in 1992. An estimated 8000 are presently in Victoria.

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