

54 dogs removed from squalid trailers

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By The Associated Press

MISSOULA - Sanders County officials removed 54 dogs from squalor in four dilapidated mobile homes and camp trailers west of Thompson Falls.

"We were squishing around in 2 inches of feces and the smell was unbelievable," said Erika Jaegers, vice president of the Thompson River Animal Care Shelter.

The dogs removed March 16 included puppies so young their eyes were not open.

Most were smaller dogs, such as dachshund and terrier crosses. Despite the rough living conditions, they had food and water.

"They were not emaciated," said Wanda Thorpe, president of TRACS. "But their coats were in poor shape because they were living in their own feces and urine."

Twelve of the dogs have died, some of them euthanized or succumbing to poor health. One of the 12, a Chihuahua-terrier cross with a deformed jaw, was killed by other dogs. The small animal had lived in a cage.

Sgt. Jerry McKeen found the dogs when he went to the trailer property on an unrelated matter. McKeen turned the animal case over to Dave Hedley, a reserve patrol deputy and retired Department of Defense agent. He has specialized in animal cruelty cases since working on them for Texas's Bexar County sheriff in the mid-1980s.

Hedley said the owner of the Montana property likely will face at least one charge of cruelty to animals. Her name was not released. Authorities said she cooperated with investigators and surrendered the dogs voluntarily.

The woman used to reside on the property, had moved to town and made trips to feed and visit the animals.

"It looks like she got way in over her head, and was overwhelmed by the number of dogs," Thorpe said, adding that only two or three had been spayed or neutered.

"You've got dogs going into heat, no separation from the males, and all of a sudden you've got 54 dogs," Thorpe said.

Thirty-two of the removed dogs were placed in a shop and garage belonging to Thorpe and her husband, Warren Winter. Ten went to the Humane Society of Western Montana in Missoula.

Officials expect the dogs eventually will be available for adoption. Thorpe said several veterinarians have volunteered spaying, neutering and vaccinations at reduced rates or no cost.