

Undercover investigation finds dead rabbits in Virginia Petland store; ailing rabbits not taken to a veterinarian

Store's rabbits linked to crowded, unlicensed rabbit mill

Between November 2018 and March 2019, the Humane Society of the United States conducted an undercover investigation at a Petland store in Fairfax, Virginia. We found that sick or injured rabbits in the store were dying without receiving veterinary care, their bodies piling up in the store's freezer. With a hidden video camera, we documented at least 14 dead rabbits in Petland's freezerⁱ. We later traced the store's main rabbit supplier to an unlicensedⁱⁱ, overcrowded breeder in Maryland, where the animals are bred in crowded and dirty conditions.



Above: Wagner Farm, a primary supplier of rabbits to Petland Fairfax, does not appear to have a USDA license, and houses about 200 rabbits in crowded and dirty conditions. Credit: HSUS 2019

Our hidden cameras showed Petland employees admitting that ailing rabbits in the store were not taken to a veterinarian. One employee told our undercover investigator that when rabbits get sick, “we just let them die.” Another employee told our undercover investigator, “they’re not checked by a vet,” and “normally the sick ones just kind of die out.” Weeks later, HSUS sent a secret shopper to the store. The store manager and a salesperson told us that the store's rabbits generally never go to a veterinarian when they are sick.ⁱⁱⁱ

Not only were rabbits dying in the store, but store employees seemed unconcerned with finding out why the animals were dying or providing care when they were ailing. While working in Petland's back room in December 2018, our investigator discovered a dead rabbit in a plastic basket, tucked under a table. When the investigator asked an employee why the dead rabbit was there, the employee said, “that's where we hide them.” The investigator was told to put the dead rabbit into a plastic Petland shopping bag and add the body to the freezer with many other similar bundles.

The animals in the freezer accumulated over time. During the investigator's first few days on the job in early November, she witnessed a manager emptying the freezer of more than a dozen small plastic-wrapped bundles. After that, the investigator began to document a new accumulation of bundles. On Jan. 8, 2019, the investigator opened every bundle in the freezer that had accumulated since early November. Each one contained a dead rabbit, wrapped in a plastic Petland bag. The investigator opened every parcel to document the losses on camera. The dead rabbits were of different sizes and breeds. All were domesticated pet rabbits.

Although the investigator determined that many of the rabbits had died in the store, at least one of the dead rabbits had been brought back into the store by a customer in December. The customer told Petland staff that the returned rabbit, "Moon," had had several seizures and then died very shortly after she purchased him^{iv}. Moon's remains were added to the other remains in the store's freezer.

Even though some very troubling diseases or injuries can cause seizures and death in rabbits', the investigator did not see any indication that Petland sent out Moon's remains, or any other rabbit's remains, for testing or examination; none of the dead rabbits in the freezer were marked with a label.



Above: Rabbits in the Fairfax Petland store appear fine at first glance, but our investigator found many were dying, and there appeared to be no attempt on Petland's part to find out why.

Below: One of the 14 dead rabbits our investigator found in Petland's freezer. Additional dead rabbits are in the bags in the background. Credit: HSUS, 2019



The HSUS reported our concerns about the dead rabbits in the Fairfax store to law enforcement authorities in February 2019, and turned over a large volume of video and notes from the investigation in March 2019.

Rabbits traced to unlicensed breeder with crowded and dirty conditions

Employees told our investigators that the store gets many of its rabbits from someone named John Wagner. An investigator then linked the name to Wagner's Farm in Centreville, Maryland^{vi}. Visiting with a hidden camera, our investigator talked to the owner, who admitted selling about 60 rabbits a month to the Fairfax Petland store.

Our hidden cameras documented about 200 rabbits at Wagner's Farm kept in poor conditions, including a large white rabbit laying across the top of a cage who was already dead, and others who were injured. Most of the rabbits were kept in very crowded and dirty cages, with only wire flooring to stand on. Many of the cages were outdoors with little protection from the elements, while others were in a barn and had visible filth hanging from the wires of the cages. The conditions were exactly like those found in puppy mills, but in this case we found a rabbit mill.

Mr. Wagner and at least one of his employees told our investigator that the rabbits at Wagner Farm are not treated by a veterinarian, even if they get sick. Our investigator asked an employee about the dead rabbit. The employee indicated that when rabbits at Wagner Farm get sick, there is not much they can do and they let them die.



Above: Rabbits in a barn at Wagner Farm had filth hanging down from their wire cages.

Below: Rabbits in outdoor hutches at Wagner Farm. Credit: HSUS, 2019



Wagner's Farm does not appear to have a USDA license, which would be required to sell large numbers of rabbits as pets through pet stores, meaning it is likely never federally inspected for health or welfare standards. Under USDA [rules](#), rabbit breeders who derive more than \$500 a year from selling the animals as pets to pet stores, dealers or online are required by law to have a USDA license and abide by specific standards of care.^{vii} Petland, Inc. should be well aware of these rules.

Despite the lack of veterinary care and questionable sourcing, the Fairfax Petland charges about \$85 for each of its rabbits, many of which it reportedly purchases from Wagner for about \$20. A local shelter [charges \\$15 to adopt a rabbit, and includes the cost of spay/neuter and a free vet exam after adoption](#).

Petland's questionable sources

This isn't the first time Petland has been accused of mistreating rabbits. In 2009, a Petland store in Akron, Ohio, closed down after an employee posted a photo on social media of herself holding up the bodies of two rabbits she had drowned at the store. She later [pleaded guilty](#) to animal cruelty. A former employee of the store told local [news station](#) that it wasn't an isolated incident. Petland terminated the Ohio store's franchise agreement.

Rabbits are not the only animals treated poorly at Petland. Our investigator also found sick puppies in the Fairfax Petland store, with as many as 21 puppies at a time being given medications or kept in isolation in the back room due to illness. Puppies were sometimes force-fed by staff when they would not eat, rather than being promptly taken to a veterinarian to find out why they were ailing. And although some of the sick puppies were eventually taken to a veterinarian, many were not.

News reports linked the Fairfax store to [underweight](#) puppies in 2017, and the store has an [F rating](#) with the Better Business Bureau due to unresolved consumer complaints. Recent news reports have linked other Petland stores to sick or very [thin puppies](#) as recently as February 2019.

Petland has about 80 pet stores across the United States, most of them franchises, and most of them sell rabbits as well as puppies and other pets. Past [HSUS investigations](#) have linked numerous Petland pet stores to [puppy mills](#), including some dealers who have appeared in our prior reports on problem puppy mills. Undercover footage HSUS released in December 2018 linked a Georgia Petland store and a Nevada Petland location to [sick and dying puppies](#). At the Georgia Petland store, our investigator documented a dead puppy in the freezer, and at the Nevada store, an ailing puppy was kept in a back room for several weeks before being shipped back to his distributor for a refund.

Rabbits are the most popular small pet in America

According to the American Pet Products Association, rabbits are the most popular small animal kept as pets in American households^{viii}, especially in family households with children. But the Humane Society of the United States cautions families about purchasing a rabbit at a pet store. Rabbits in pet stores may be sick, and many come from questionable sources, like the one we found. In addition, many families who buy rabbits aren't prepared for their special needs.

If families decide to acquire a pet rabbit, we recommend adopting one from a [rescue group](#) or a local [shelter](#), where one is more likely to get a healthy, vet-checked, and spayed or neutered rabbit. Rabbits can be found in most animal shelters, and sites like [Petfinder](#) allow people to search for rabbits in need of a home in their community.

Shelter rabbits may even be much healthier and provided better care than pet store rabbits. Public records obtained from Fairfax County Animal Services show that the county shelter took in more than 180 rabbits in 2018, only two of which died in the care of Fairfax County^{ix}—a vastly lower death rate than what appears to be occurring at the Fairfax Petland just a few miles away.

Avoid impulse purchases

Petland’s lack of care for the rabbits in its store shows why we oppose purchasing rabbits as pets in pet stores, which is common prior to Easter. The animals are often sold for short-term profit with little regard for their veterinary or [species-specific needs](#).

We ask families to research the [needs of rabbits](#) carefully before choosing one as a pet, and always consider rescue or shelter adoption as the kindest option.

ⁱ The carcasses were documented in one day, but the bodies had accumulated in the freezer over a period of about two months.

ⁱⁱ The breeder apparently does not have a USDA license, which would be required to sell large numbers of warm-blooded pets to pet stores. HSUS researchers were also unable to find any record of the farm having a county or state license as of March 15, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ March 2, 2019 video

^{iv} Dec. 18, 2018 video

^v A high death rate in rabbits could be linked to a number of factors, including injuries from mishandling, or a viral disease called Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD). According to a recent issue of *Domesticated Rabbits*^v magazine (Nov/Dec 2018, volume 46, p 4-5), RHD is highly contagious, and “if you have sudden deaths of several rabbits [you should] isolate your herd and contact your local veterinarian.”

^{vi} A review of the USDA license list in March 2019 found no license for any operation in Centreville, MD or anyone named Wagner in MD. The USDA requires breeders who sell more than \$500 worth of rabbits to pet stores per year to obtain a USDA license and abide by specific standards of care.

^{vii} When our investigator asked, Petland Fairfax’s management would only say that the store gets most of its rabbits from a “local breeder” they called Mr. Wagner.

^{viii} Rabbit ownership statistics were sourced from the American Pet Products Association’s National Pet Owners Survey, 2017-18

^{ix} Shelter’s intake and outcome reports, January 2019

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