Going Whole Hog

Officers save neglected piglets in rural Maryland

BY KATINA ANTONIADES

No one knows how long the animals were there—at least, no one's volunteering the information—but on March 9, a utility worker called the Animal Management Division of Prince George's County to report several pigs living without food, water, or shelter. When Officer Rosemary Vozobule arrived at the property in Brandywine, Md., she found eight piglets in a filthy pen made from wood pallets.

Desperate for food, the piglets followed Vozobule as she walked around their makeshift pen. They'd soon get some much needed nourishment, but a littermate wasn't so lucky—Vozobule also found the body of a dead piglet. The rest of the property was full of trash, car parts, and other debris, and the nearby house was run down, with no evidence of human habitation.

Vozobule called Terri Littlejohn, assistant associate director of animal management, who arrived soon after. "It was, for lack of a better word, a pigsty," says Littlejohn. "Just absolutely disgusting. ... They were in mud [and feces]. ... It was almost like quicksand."

More help arrived in the form of animal control officer Kim Montgomery—"she's very knowledgeable about farm animals," says Littlejohn—and veterinarians from Southern Maryland Equine Veterinary Services in Upper Marlboro. As required by the county in livestock cases, the veterinarians gave the green light to remove the piglets after determining their health was in danger, says Littlejohn. The pigs were emaciated, and vets estimated that they were under a year old.

Because details of the case were similar to those encountered by the agency during a 2004 seizure of 52 farm animals from a vacant property a mile or two away, officers—who suspected the person convicted in that case might be responsible—alerted the police. (Later that week, Montgomery and the veterinarians removed two underweight, unsocialized Arabian horses from the same property that held the pigs.)

Even though the young pigs didn't weigh anywhere near the 500 to 600 pounds they'll reach as adults, handling them was a challenge. Treats of pig pellets, carrots, and apples helped lure them closer, but the piglets were still tough to catch, especially in several inches of muck. The officers would either corner a pig or jump onto him and then maneuver him into a dog crate. "We looked like Mutt, Jeff, and Jeff," says Littlejohn. Worried that their horse trailer would get stuck in the mud, they moved the pigs rather than the trailer, carrying them in their crates for about 500 feet.

Although the Animal Management Division handles about four or five livestock cases each month—involving all sorts of animals from cows to geese to alpacas—its current facility can't house farm animals. The pigs were taken to a location in Croom, Md., where they stayed for a couple of days before spending several additional days at nearby Charles County Animal Control.

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY ANIMAL MANAGEMENT DIVISION

ROBIN HENDERSON/WOODSTOCK FARM ANIMAL SANCTUARY

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As for more permanent housing, Littlejohn found other solutions—Poplar Springs Animal Sanctuary in Poolesville, Md., Woodstock Farm Animal Sanctuary in Woodstock, N.Y., and Farm Sanctuary in Watkins Glen, N.Y. "When we get farm animals, if the animal is able to be adopted out to a forever home ... we try to place it in a forever home," says Littlejohn. "We don't want to see any of our farm animals used as a source of food."

Officers haven't charged anyone with a crime in the recent cases of the neglected pigs and horses because no one came forward to claim them after officers posted notices on the property and sent a letter to the suspect. The person convicted in the 2004 cases still owes $7,700 in fines for animal cruelty. AS