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## **PETA trial opens in animal deaths**

**Two charged with felony cruelty; group says euthanasia was humane**

**Kristin Collins**

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It began as a bizarre small-town crime.

Every Wednesday, in a Dumpster behind a Piggly Wiggly in northeastern North Carolina, a fresh load of dead cats and dogs appeared.

The stakeout and the ensuing arrests only deepened the mystery. The people caught dumping garbage bags full of euthanized animals were employees of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, one of the largest and most radical animal rights groups in the world.

This is the group that fights for the rights of rats and frogs. The group that throws blood on women in furs, compares the killing of animals for food to the Holocaust and opposes animal research -- even when it leads to lifesaving medical advances.

Today, more than a year and a half after their arrest, the two PETA workers are to go on trial in Hertford County, in one of the state's poorest and most rural regions. Adria J. Hinkle, of Norfolk, Va., and Andrew B. Cook, of Virginia Beach, Va., are charged with 21 counts each of animal cruelty, a felony that can carry jail time, along with charges of littering and obtaining property by false pretenses.

The trial is expected to last more than a week and will be watched by people all over the country. Court TV is making a bid to televise it.

Many hope the trial will answer the question that has become a chorus among animal lovers: Why would PETA kill animals, many of them healthy, and dump their bodies like trash?

"Considering how extreme PETA tends to be, isn't the fact that they're euthanizing animals and throwing them in a Dumpster, isn't that bizarre? Contradictory?" said JoAnn Jones, head of a volunteer animal adoption group in Hertford County.

Jones said she plans to attend the trial because "I want to know the truth."

PETA's choice

Officials with PETA say the truth is simple. The group, based in Norfolk, began working in several northeastern North Carolina counties in the 1990s.

Phil Hirschkop, a lawyer for PETA, said the group got complaints about horrible conditions in animal shelters. Emaciated dogs unable to move, lying in their own filth. Animals suffering through long, terrifying deaths in gas chambers. Animals being killed with a drug that caused their internal organs to seize up while they were still conscious.

PETA, a well-funded organization that raises more than \$25 million a year from 1.6 million members and supporters, started sending workers to Bertie, Northampton and Hertford counties.

PETA employees would clean and renovate shelters, hand out free doghouses to the poor, and take sick animals to the vet. They set up programs that allowed residents to get their animals spayed or neutered at no cost. And they began handling euthanizations at the shelters, Hirschkop said.

They used the same method that veterinarians use: an injection of sodium pentobarbital that kills the animal almost instantly.

"PETA's choice is to allow those animals to be shot or gassed in a very cruel manner, or to euthanize them themselves and at least do it humanely," Hirschkop said.

By 2005, the PETA people were picking up so many animals that they didn't have room in their small van to carry them back to Norfolk alive. So Hinkle took them from the shelters one by one and euthanized them in the van, Hirschkop said.

He says the only crime Hinkle and Cook committed was throwing the animals in a trash bin, an act for which PETA President Ingrid Newkirk has apologized and offered to pay.

Hirschkop said the pair dumped the animals because they had other stops to make and the animals often started to smell before they got back to Norfolk, where PETA has facilities for cremating animals.

"They never should have done it," he said. "But this is not the crime of the century."

Hirschkop says that in a region where county officials neglect animal shelters and private landowners routinely shoot or poison stray animals, the sudden concern about animal welfare is disingenuous. He says he believes law enforcement officials have pursued the case because they don't like what PETA stands for, and he says the prosecution has become a matter of politics rather than justice.

Valerie Asbell, the district attorney for Hertford, Bertie and Northampton counties, is prosecuting the case. Officials in her office declined to comment.

A different version

County officials and veterinarians in the three counties, however, disagree with PETA's story. They say PETA promised to try and find homes for the animals they took and to euthanize only as a last resort.

Hertford County veterinarian Patrick Proctor told reporters at the time of the arrests that three of the cats in the Dumpster were a healthy mother and kittens that he turned over to PETA on the promise that they would be adopted. His allegations resulted in three charges of obtaining property by false pretenses. Proctor did not return calls from The News & Observer.

Officials in the three counties also say they believed the animals PETA took had at least a chance at finding homes.

"The verbal agreement was, if they felt like the animals could possibly be adopted, they would," said Sue Gay, the head of Northampton County animal control. "We thought at least some of them were being adopted."

But some also admit that they didn't have the time to worry about what PETA was doing with

the legions of stray animals that were stretching the counties' scant resources.

"All I knew was they came in, they said they had X amount of animals and they were carrying them to Virginia, and I didn't question them," said Charles Jones, who is head of animal control in Hertford County. Jones is also the fire marshal and the head of emergency medical services and emergency management.

The three counties no longer give animals to PETA. But the town of Windsor, in Bertie County, still turns over all its stray animals to the group.

Even after the arrests, Town Administrator Allen Castelloe said he has never checked into what PETA does with the town's animals.

Hirschkop said PETA never promised county officials that it would find homes for animals. PETA doesn't have an adoption facility, he said, and there are simply too many strays in the region to find homes for them all.

Animal advocates say PETA was needlessly killing animals. They say that, with a little work, PETA could have found homes for at least some stray animals.

JoAnn Jones, the Hertford County animal advocate, started working in the county shelter in July. Since then, she said, her volunteer group has adopted out 175 animals. She said they call on their network of animal-loving friends, place ads on the Internet and, sometimes, send animals to other states.

"We have a lot of dogs that are sleeping in beds, riding in cars and living the good life," Jones said.

Cheryl Powell, a veterinarian in Bertie County, said that before PETA moved in, she was finding homes for many of the adoptable animals that came through the Bertie shelter. Once PETA came, she said, the group no longer wanted her help.

Powell said PETA workers told her they were taking animals to a farm where they would try to adopt them out. But she said she began to suspect that the van they drove was too small to get all those animals back to Virginia, and when they came asking whether she had stray animals, she never turned any over.

"They lied," Powell said. "I know they never told me that they were taking animals and euthanizing them on a wholesale plan."

The deception, Powell said, stings as much as the animals' deaths.

Staff writer Kristin Collins can be reached at [kcollins@newsobserver.com](mailto:kcollins@newsobserver.com).

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