

Eighteen goats rescued from dilapidated barn in Aroostook County

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By SUSAN KIMBALL Staff Writer

Daniella Tessier could see right away that there was no way out.

Tessier, the founder of Peace Ridge Sanctuary in Penobscot, one of the few shelters in Maine for abused and neglected farm animals, was standing in a dilapidated barn in Aroostook County helping a state animal welfare agent rescue 18 goats.

Additional Photos



Daniella Tessier of Peace Ridge Sanctuary in Penobscot feeds goats last month after she rescued them from a barn in Aroostook County where they were living up in the rafters on top of a large pile of manure. Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

“Originally when the Animal Welfare Program called us,” Tessier says, “they said they got a report that there was a herd of dairy goats living on the second story of a barn.”

But there was no second story. The goats – some of whom were 8 to 10 years old – were actually living on top of a huge, ever expanding pile of their own manure layered with hay.

“They had been literally raised up, gradually over time, into the ceiling of the barn,” Tessier says. “Their heads were literally pressed up against the ceiling.”

To get a breath of fresh air the animals had to stick their heads out of holes in the side of the barn.

“They had never been outside,” Tessier says. “He (the farmer) admitted it.”

Liam Hughes, the director of the state’s Animal Welfare Program, says he can’t comment on the specifics of the case because the complaint is still open. But Hughes does say that the farmer could face animal cruelty charges even though he voluntarily surrendered the goats. That decision will be made after consulting with the district attorney.

“There’s no easy explanation for why people do what they do,” Hughes says. “There could be mental illness. There could be financial problems. They might be overwhelmed. And sometimes, in rare cases, there are people who are just bad to animals.”

In 2014, the state’s six district humane agents investigated 240 cases of alleged animal cruelty. They’re also responsible for inspecting boarding and breeding kennels, pet stores and animal shelters – about 500 facilities in all. It’s a lot of territory to cover.

Which is why it’s important for the public to keep an eye out.

“It’s important that people take an interest in what’s going on in their community,” Hughes says. “If they see something they should say something.”

Susanna Richer of the advocacy group Maine Friends of Animals says it’s also important to note that complaints can be made anonymously, as long as the person has witnessed the abuse or neglect first hand.

“People are often hesitant to report because they’re afraid there will be repercussions,” Richer says, “because usually it’s a neighbor or relative who is abusing the animals.”

It was an anonymous caller who alerted Animal Welfare about the goats in Aroostook County. It took three trips to get them out of the barn, and it’s taking a lot of money to care for them now.

Peace Ridge Sanctuary has already spent \$20,000 on a new barn and veterinary care, and Tessier says they expect to spend \$20,000 more. Most of the goats are pregnant and already having babies. She says grain alone costs \$200 per day and health problems continue to mount.

Abby Arena, a Winterport veterinarian who is treating the animals, says many had broken horns from bumping into the rafters in the barn.

“Some of (their horns) were growing into their faces and obstructing their vision,” Arena says, “so we had to do some surgical removals of those damaged horns.”

None of the goats had ever had their hooves trimmed. The older ones, Tessier says, looked like they were wearing elf shoes.

Both Arena and veterinarian Jennifer Larson, who works with her at Ridge Runner Veterinary Services, say they’ve never seen anything like it.

“Their feet were so overgrown ... that they were spending a lot of time resting on their knees,” Larson says.

Eventually the rescued goats and all of the kids – 11 babies so far and at least another 10 on the way – will be put up for adoption.

“We’ll place them just like you would a dog or cat,” Tessier says. “We’re going to do barn visits. They won’t be adopted out for breeding. They will be retired pets.”

She says the situation in Aroostook County went on for far too long. But the good news is that the animals are finally safe and sound – and healing.

“These goats are lucky that somebody said something.”

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