

How Dogs and Cats Get Recycled Into Pet Food

By John Eckhouse
Chronicle Staff Writer

Although you won't find it on any pet-food label, many brands contain dog and cat remains.

Each year, millions of dead American dogs and cats are processed along with billions of pounds of other animal materials by companies known as renderers. The finished products — tallow and meat meals — serve as raw material for thousands of items that include cosmetics and pet food.

The rendering industry denies that this occurs.

"I don't know of any small animals going into soap or dog food,"

said Ray Kelly, a spokesman for the National Renderers Association and executive vice president of Baker Commodities, a Los Angeles rendering company.

Pet-food executives also say no pets end up in their products. Many manufacturers in the \$8 billion industry require suppliers to sign affidavits to that effect.

Yet federal and state officials, including the Food and Drug Administration, the American Veterinary Medical Association and the California Veterinary Medical Association, confirm that pets routinely are rendered after they die and the end product frequently finds its way into pet food.

First of two parts

"The pets serve a viable purpose by providing feedstuff for the animal feed chain," said Lea McGovern, chief of the animal feed safety branch of the FDA.

The practice is neither illegal nor unhealthy. Pets probably constitute a very small percentage of a day's production at a renderer and an even lower percentage of the ingredients in a package of pet food.

The National Animal Control Association estimates that U.S. animal shelters annually put to sleep 13 million household pets. Its statistics show that 30 percent of these pets

are buried, 30 percent are cremated and 40 percent — or about 5.2 million — are sent to rendering factories.

Several hundred thousand deceased California pets are trucked off to renderers in Los Angeles, Modesto and Sacramento, and some of them end up in pet food.

"When you read pet-food labels and it says meat or bone meal, that's what it is — cooked and converted animals, including some dogs and cats," said Eileen Layne, of the California Veterinary Medical Association.

Critics like Libby Schenkman of the Berkeley-based Animal Rights Connection are upset by

such "cannibalism," but government, academic and industry officials say rendering pets recycles a valuable commodity while simultaneously solving a difficult waste-disposal problem.

"The alternative is burying, or some other form of environmental contamination," said Bert Mitchell, associate director of the surveillance-and-compliance branch of the FDA.

Most scientists say the high temperatures and pressures used in rendering kill any viruses and bacteria.

Veterinarians at the University of Minnesota warned in a paper that the sodium pentobarbital used to

put pets to sleep "survived rendering without undergoing degradation." They concluded, however, the residue would be too small to cause a problem so long as renderers mixed euthanized pets with other raw materials throughout a production run.

Bay Area animal shelters and veterinarians rely heavily on rendering for animal disposal. Facing a mammoth pet-overpopulation problem, shelters in the nine-county area reluctantly put to sleep almost 100,000 sick or abandoned animals per year. Virtually all of them have the euthanized pets hauled to renderers in Sacramento and

See Page C2, Col. 1

C 2 ***

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From Page C1

desto. Rendering industry executives and animal shelter officials warn that the price of animal disposal would soar if rendering of pets came to a halt.

For instance, it would cost the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley \$3,500 per month to cremate the shelter's dead pets compared to the \$1,100 per month it pays to have them picked up by Koeftan Industries and delivered to Sacramento Rendering Co., according to Executive Director William Burke.

Koeftan supplies the Humane Society with a freezer and picks up a full truckload of frozen animals there three times a week. It has similar arrangements at shelters and veterinary hospitals in six other counties.

'Look Elsewhere'

Mike Koewler, president of Koeftan and Sacramento Rendering, acknowledged that his company renders dead pets but insisted that the end product does not end up in pet food.

"We don't do that," he said. "If you want to pursue that issue, look elsewhere, because it does go on all over the country."

Koewler said that pets render-

ed at his facility on the outskirts of Mather Air Force Base go into products that are either sold out of state, exported, used as fertilizer or fed to chickens and cattle.

Independent Rendering, a Richmond company, makes pickups at the Alameda and San Francisco County animal shelters, according to shelter officials. They say the ani-

'The small animals are a big part of the company'

mals are trucked to Independent's parent company, Modesto Tallow, for rendering.

Executives at Modesto Tallow denied that they even pick up pets. Yet employees, vendors and some state inspectors say they regularly observe dogs and cats rendered at both the Sacramento and Modesto plants. They say the processed products are sold to companies that include pet food manufacturers.

"Thousands and thousands of pounds of dogs and cats are picked

up and brought here every day," said one employee of Sacramento Rendering. "The small animals are a big part of the company," confirmed an ex-employee.

The two estimated that the company rendered somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 pounds of dogs and cats a day out of a total of 250,000 to 500,000 pounds of cattle, poultry, butcher scrap and other materials. Sacramento Rendering recently began transferring most of its dead pets to North State Rendering in Chico for processing. The end product is returned to Sacramento where, according to employees, it is blended with other products routinely purchased by pet food companies.

California law states that rendered dogs and cats must be labeled as "dry rendered tankage," a product rarely used in pet food. But with meat meal and bone meal — a basic staple of most pet foods — selling for about \$235 per ton and dry rendered tankage at just \$172.50 per ton, food brokers said there's some incentive to push some small animals into the higher-price products.

In addition, the same product that is called tankage in California can be — and is — labeled as meat and bone meal when shipped out of state. California does not inspect meat and bone meals arriving from

other states to determine if they contain rendered pets.

Three Agencies

Three different state agencies have responsibility for inspection and enforcement of rendering factories, which leaves many gaps.

To make sure no small animals go into pet food components, "we'd have to put a person at the rendering plant at all times it's in operation," said Steve Wong, acting branch chief of the Feed, Fertilizer and Livestock Drugs branch of the California Department of Food and Agriculture. His eight inspectors visit each rendering plant an average of once every 2½ months.

In spot checks during the past two years, the state cited Sacramento Rendering on five occasions for product-labeling violations. In another case 15 months ago, a shipment of 52,280 pounds labeled as meat and bone meal headed to Sacramento Rendering from West Coast Rendering Co. in Los Angeles was found by state inspectors to be tankage. The state imposes no penalties for mislabeling by a rendering firm; it simply asks that the practice be corrected.

Executives at four of the leading pet food companies say no household pets are in the raw materials they buy from renderers.

THE PET DISPOSAL PROBLEM

Local animal shelters, overwhelmed by the large number of stray and unwanted dogs and cats they handle, dispose of the euthanized animals by sending their remains to rendering plants in Modesto and Sacramento. Figures below are for fiscal 1989 unless noted.

County	Animals Impounded	Returned to owner	Adopted	Euthanized ¹
San Francisco	17,144	1,535	7,666	7,721
Santa Clara ²	40,515	3,544	5,139	29,067
Alameda	23,290	3,986	5,281	14,102
Contra Costa	20,400	3,050	3,564	14,187
San Mateo	16,453	3,064	3,955	9,296
Solano	10,974	1,229	1,240	8,586
Marin ³	6,215	1,993	1,376	2,846
Napa	2,885	351	726	1,553
Sonoma ⁴	17,084	3,193	4,370	9,262
LOCAL TOTAL	148,745	21,945	33,317	96,220
Los Angeles ⁵	163,259	11,865	28,490	114,714

¹ Includes pets dead on arrival and those which died in custody of the shelters

² 1989 calendar year

³ All the euthanized animals in Marin and some in Sonoma are cremated.

⁴ Includes 12 of 22 animal shelters in the city and county

NOTE: The number disposed may not equal total number of animals impounded because some remain on hand at the end of the year or are disposed of in the fiscal year after they are impounded.

Source: Chronicle research

"There are no dogs or cats in our products," said Patrick Farrell, a Ralston Purina Co. spokesman. "We have strict quality assurance programs in place from all of our suppliers."

Yet rendering industry executives say it would be impossible

for any purchaser to know the exact contents of what they buy. One year industry veteran said it would be easy to pass off dogs and cats as poultry by-product, because of similar protein content.

An East Coast executive, w
See Page C3, Col. 1

Rendering Can Turn Waste Into Usable Products

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Rendering may be the world's oldest industry, as well as the first recycling business.

It dates back to the times of the ancient Egyptians. In California, most of the early Missions had rendering rooms, where cattle scraps were processed into tallow and exported.

Today, rendering companies in the United States collect, purify and process waste animal material and grease from slaughterhouses, farms, butcher shops, grocery stores, fishmongers and restaurants. They pick up an estimated 91 million pounds of material each day, some of which they pay for and some of which they are paid to haul away.

"We're dealing with something a lot of people don't even want to think about, but that's fine, we'll handle it and keep everything clean," said Don Brownstein, a partner at West Coast Rendering in Los Angeles.

Though unknown and unseen by most

people — because of their pungent odors, most facilities are located on the far outskirts of urban areas — the rendering industry produces raw materials used in thousands of products purchased by consumers and businesses.

There are two main types of renderers, those which are adjuncts to meat-packing plants and process edible products — and are closely inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture — and those which process products inedible for humans.

Edible by-products are used in shortenings, canned and frozen foods, chili, pizza and egg rolls. Inedible by-products find their way into soap, lipstick and other cosmetics, paint and even shaving cream, as well as animal feeds.

"Everything is recycled, nothing goes to waste," said Gary Essex, general manager of Florin Tallow, a recycling company in Dixon. The National Renderers Association estimates that more than 95 percent of the discarded animal materials collected by rendering companies are successfully recycled into useful products.

In California, the 27 rendering plants process about 150 million pounds of animal waste a month.

"If the rendering industry closed tomorrow and we had to take that to landfill, we'd fill it up so fast it would make your head spin," said Michael Koewler, president of Sacramento Rendering and a board member of the national association. Rendering prevents inedible animal by-products or the grease from a restaurant's deep fat fryers from being tossed down sewers or in dumps, he said.

Koewler said there is a rendering plant about every 400 miles across the country in order to take care of the recyclable waste discarded daily by meat packers and restaurants.

When a beef steer is slaughtered, for example, only about 58 percent is used for food. The remainder — excess fat, bones, viscera and hide — goes to renderers. They also collect diseased meat rejected by USDA inspectors for human consumption, such as cancerous tissues from steers or chickens, but federal health authorities say any tox-

ins disappear when processed at high temperatures in the renderers' cooking equipment.

Renderers have two basic products: fat, called tallow or grease, and dried meat and bone meal. Some of the tallow goes directly into soaps and animal feed. Chemical manufacturers purchase the rest, processing the tallow into fatty acids used in lubricants, cosmetics, cement, polishes and printing inks. Feed mills purchase the meat and bone meals, which serve as a basic ingredient for chicken, cattle, hog and pet food.

Historically, most rendering companies have been local, family-owned firms. The one exception is Darling-DeLaware Co. Inc., which became the only nationwide rendering company after being acquired by a group of Texas investors in 1986 (see related story, Page C3).

Because its products compete with alternative commodities from around the world, such as Malaysian palm oil, the rendering industry tends to see its fortunes ebb and flow. Prices for tallow and meat meals are on a downswing.

"In recent years we've been selling our end products at prices less than what they were 15 years ago," said Ray Kelly, executive vice president of Baker Commodities and a spokesman for the National Renderers Association. Tallow today commands only 13¢ a pound, compared with 25¢ a pound in 1979.

To help keep sales up, renderers have increased their exports of tallow to Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and some Central American countries. But competition from New Zealand and Australia has cut heavily into exports of meat and bone meals.

The U.S. trend away from consumption of red meat also has hurt the rendering industry, because it reduces the source of raw material.

"But it's still a pretty lucrative business," said Craig Breunig, president of Whoo By Products, a renderer located outside Omaha, Neb. He said as long as consumers eat beef, pork and chicken, there will always be a rendering industry because it's the only way to dispose of the by-products.