

**House Bill No. 1538**  
**Testimony before the House Agriculture Committee**  
**Heidi Riddle**  
**January 31, 2025**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Heidi Riddle, I live in LaMoure and I am here today representing myself in support of HB 1538. I initiated this effort, along with Lacey Enger, who is also speaking here today.

***THE ISSUE: North Dakota has a homeless pet and overpopulation problem, compounded by full animal shelters, overburdened and exhausted volunteers, and a documented national shortage of veterinarians.***

I have volunteered with animal rescue in some capacity or another in multiple states over the past 20 years. I have done everything from cleaning kennels to petting cats and walking dogs to taking in foster animals and strays. I have never seen such a dire situation as I see today. I am not even on the front lines of rescue, so I will let others who are discuss more about their experiences, but as a known animal lover in the community, I receive multiple calls about neglected, abandoned and homeless animals. I try to help however I can, which is usually to bring them into my home, get them healthy and then try to rehome them. I have had some success finding homes for young kittens but less so with adult cats. I now have ten cats in my permanent care and continue to have strays show up at our farm. The Crazy Cat Crew thankfully sponsored some of the veterinary care for some cats, but much of what I do is at my own personal expense. It has become cost prohibitive for me to personally take in any more animals, which is heartbreaking to turn them away.

A recent report by *Best Friends Animal Society* collected data for all states and estimates that there are nearly 10,000 animals in shelters in North Dakota. These shelters are chronically over capacity and volunteers and fosters are drained. There are countless incidents of stray animals that have been presumably either dumped or have been born to a stray animal that have nowhere to go. Everyday people ask shelters to take in animals that are no longer wanted, or found roaming with no one claiming them, or to help find homes for an unplanned litter.

Overpopulation of pets leads to abandonment, neglect, and abuse. While I am not here today to speak about animal cruelty laws, it bears mentioning that sadly, North Dakota was recently ranked #50 on the strength of its animal protection laws (*Animal Legal Defense Fund*). Combine this with the oversaturation of shelters, many animals that do not have homes are subjected to horrific abuse and their assailants are then not even held accountable. Case in point – the individual that decapitated a kitten with a shovel while his friends took video of the incident received no punishment, no fines or probation and no restrictions on animal ownership. North Dakota can do better. We believe our laws should better reflect our state's ethics and empathy. This starts with controlling the populations so that every pet can have a safe home.

Beyond the concern for the animals themselves, there are other societal and ecological damages that result from high numbers of homeless animals. When it comes to the feral cat population, a single female cat can have litters of around 12 kittens each year, which quickly multiply (*International Cat Care*). While cats are often beloved pets, as a free roaming invasive species, they have a devastating impact on our native species. According to the *American Bird Conservancy*, the number of domestic cats has tripled

over the past 40 years. Both feral and outdoor pet cats kill well over 1 billion birds in the United States every year. There are additional concerns for human health and safety, property and nuisance issues, and livestock and pets (*USDA APHIS Wildlife Services, October 2021, Wildlife Damage Management Technical Series, Free-ranging and Feral Cats*).

While much of the information pertains to feral cats, there are similar problems in areas with homeless dogs, even resulting in a recent tragic dog mauling incident here in our state.

**THE PROPOSED SOLUTION: *The proposal is to create a spay/neuter grant fund in North Dakota to be managed by an oversight entity.***

At the time we initiated this proposal, we set up a framework for how funds could be distributed through the shelters and would reimburse the veterinarians. We created the framework because we didn't know if that should be part of a piece of legislation we were proposing, so we erred on the side of caution. We also did not want to place a greater burden on the Department of Agriculture. The way the bill is currently worded, there are not details about how funds would be administered. We support the bill in its current form and defer to administration of the funds by the Department, however, we have a copy of the framework here if the Committee would like to see it. We also offer our assistance in the development and administration of any such plan if it is wanted.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we believe that the proposal will be an effective way to alleviate pet overpopulation, shelter overcrowding, and animal suffering. We would suggest that oversight of the fund be administered by a board or committee (to assist the ND Department of Agriculture) on a primarily volunteer basis.

We are in favor of a "do pass" vote for HB 1538.