Dutch authorities, breeders question 'designer' cats

by Penni Crabtree

The recent seizure by Dutch authorities of three exotic cats that a U.S.-based "designer" pet company says it created has sparked allegations by some cat breeders that the felines aren't what they are advertised to be.

DESIGNER CATS - LifeStyle Pets says the Ashera cat, shown on the company's Web site, is the result of a 'proprietary blend' of exotic bloodlines. CNS Photo courtesy of LifeStyle Pets On Jan. 17, customs officials confiscated three so-called Ashera cats marketed by Delaware-based LifeStyle Pets, and are investigating whether the large cats with leopardlike spots violate an international treaty that forbids the sale or trade of protected species and their offspring.

LifeStyle Pets, which claims that the trademarked Ashera is the result of a "proprietary blend" of exotic bloodlines and are "unique in that genetic monitoring is used to standardize breeding," sold one of the three confiscated cats for 27,000 euros, about $40,000, to a Dutch couple, according to accounts in the Dutch press. In the United States, LifeStyle offers the Ashera for $22,000 to $27,000, according to its Web site.

But a U.S. cat breeder claims that at least two of the three animals seized in the Netherlands are not Asheras but Savannah F1 cats - which commonly sell for $5,000 to $6,500 - and were purchased from his Pennsylvania breeding facility. LifeStyle Pets and its founder, Simon Brodie, did not respond to telephone and e-mailed questions about the Netherlands cat seizure or allegations that the cats are Savannahs purchased from a Savannah cat breeder.

LifeStyle Pets is an offshoot of Allerca, a company that made national headlines in 2006 with its claim to have developed a cat that is virtually free of sneeze-inducing allergens.

Chris Shirk of Cutting Edge Cats, a Pennsylvania Savannah breeder, said he identified the alleged Ashera cats as his from several pictures that ran in the Dutch press, including Amsterdam's De Telegraaf, the largest Dutch daily morning newspaper. One photo shown by Dutch media is one that Shirk said he took and used in advertising his Savannah cats online, he said.

Shirk said he sold three young male Savannah F1 cats to Martin Stucki of A1 Savannahs, an Oklahoma cat breeder, and shipped them by air Jan. 11.

"I'm positive two of the cats are mine from the photos I've seen, and I suspect the third one is as well," said Shirk, who said he has filed a claim with Dutch authorities to reclaim the cats and provided them with litter certificates, photos and other documentation to prove their lineage. "I'm very distraught about this; it is just wrong, it is fraudulent."

Shirk said he has also offered to provide DNA samples of the alleged parents of the cats so Dutch authorities can compare them with DNA samples from the three contested cats.

Stucki declined to answer questions about whom he sold the cats to, but said it was not to anyone who identified themselves as Brodie. Stucki confirmed that Brodie contacted him last year about purchasing a number of Savannahs.

Allerca was based in San Diego until late 2006, when the company announced it would move to Los Angeles, and it later reincorporated in Delaware. Time magazine placed Allerca's hypoallergenic cat on its Best Inventions of 2006 list.

Yet Allerca and LifeStyle Pets have also generated skepticism among geneticists, allergists and traditional cat breeders, who question whether the companies have accomplished what they claim. Allerca, which sells its sneeze-free cats for $7,900, has not released peer-reviewed scientific data or submitted it for peer review in a scientific journal.

Some critics have expressed concerns about Brodie, who has a history of failed companies and a criminal conviction involving a business venture in his native Britain. Brodie was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in jail for

accounting fraud for his role in the 1992 demise of Cloudhoppers, a hot air balloon-flight business.

In 2006, the California Department of Corporations ordered Allerca and Brodie to stop offering or selling cat franchises in California. The company had been marketing the franchises - at $45,000 a territory - on its Web site and in e-mails to residents of California and other states.

Among Brodie's more recent woes, last year Allerca was suspended from doing business in California because the company had failed to pay state taxes since 2004. And three former Brodie employees won judgments last year against Allerca and another Brodie company, Cyntegra, for about $220,000 in unpaid salaries and severance.

The attorney for one of the employees, Brendan O'Dwyer, testified before the California Labor Commission that Allerca had "a lot of cash flow problems and has tried to skirt its responsibilities in a number of ways," according to court records.

Allerca is now part of LifeStyle Pets, according to its Web site.

Roel Vincken, a spokesman for the Netherlands General Inspectorate, said the three young male cats seized by Dutch customs are being well cared for and won't be destroyed.

He said they were seized at the border because their shipment appeared to violate an international treaty known as CITIES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora. One cat was being shipped to a couple in the Netherlands, while the other two were in transit to other countries, Vincken said.

"Customs could tell they were not everyday cats that were being shipped," Vincken said. "They have the looks of a wild animal."

Vincken said that if the cats' immediate bloodline includes African Serval and Asian Leopard, as LifeStyle Pet's Web site claims, then trafficking in them might violate the CITIES treaty.

A Chicago-based Savannah cat breeder and broker, Cynthia King, also identified from the Dutch photos one of the young cats seized in the Netherlands as a product of Shirk's Savannah cat breeding facility. She said she had tried to help Shirk sell the cats recently.

In 2006, King said Brodie tried to purchase five to seven first-generation female Savannahs from her, but she said he used an assumed name - Campbell Francis - and said he was from a company called Monsenco Capital. The deal never went through because Brodie did not send the check.

At the time, Brodie acknowledged the subterfuge after the address on the King contract was identified as the one Brodie used on a U.S. Patent and Trademark Office application for the Ashera trademark, but he said he did not use his real identity so he would not be "gouged" on the price.

At the time, Brodie said his company's cat breeding experts asked him to acquire the Savannahs for the purpose of devising "the right formula" for the Ashera. Brodie said the company, using unspecified "genetic techniques" and artificial insemination, had combined components of three breeds to create the Ashera.

He also said that while the Ashera would look similar to a Savannah, it is not a Savannah.

Dutch authorities, breeders question 'designer' cats by Penni Crabtree