

Puppy mill squad based in Whitchurch-Stouffville

BY ANNE HOWLAND
Staff Writer

A special operations unit with the sole purpose of seeking out and shutting down puppy mills and other forms of large-scale animal cruelty throughout Ontario will begin work next month.

The Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals announced the creation of the unit, which will operate out of the society's provincial headquarters on Woodbine Avenue in Whitchurch-Stouffville, Monday to kick-off its annual violence prevention week.

"The society estimates there are upwards of 400 puppy mills in Ontario," said Vicky Earle, Ontario SPCA chief executive officer. "This is a problem of crisis proportion, requiring targeted resources."

Dedicated personnel from the society's investigations department will research and act on information about puppy mills, as well as dog-fighting operations, the illegal slaughter of animals and their inhumane transport and the exotic animal trade. The department's other 340 inspectors and agents will continue to investigate individual instances of animal cruelty and neglect.

"There are tens of thousands of animals suffering as a result of individuals or groups of people who make it their job to corral and abuse animals for so-called sport and profit," said Craig Daniell, director of investigations. "The special operations unit will further strengthen our efforts to close down these operators."

The unit will initially be funded with remaining money from the puppy mill rescue fund, set up in response to the recent Vaughan and Penelon Falls puppy mill rescues. Public donations to the fund raised more than \$100,000 that has gone directly to the 230 dogs rescued. The society will also use a portion of the \$50,000 grant received from the provincial government in support of the recent puppy mill shutdowns.

"We have sufficient funds for the initial stage, but the demands on the unit are immense and more support will be required to further expand and develop the program," Earle said, adding the society plans to apply to private foundations for ongoing funding of the unit.

The society's annual violence prevention week, now to Saturday, focuses on the link between violence to animals and violence to humans.

"In our community policing response to the citizens of York Region, we try to determine the real needs of our citizens, then work in partnership with the community to respond as best we can to those needs. Today, our citizens are both two and four-legged, that is, our pets and their owners," said York Regional Police Chief Robert Middaugh, whose force works closely with the Ontario SPCA to identify domestic violence and its link to animal cruelty.

Earle also said the society's family violence assistance program, which provides emergency care to the animals of women fleeing abusive situations, has seen a 37-per-cent increase in use since 1999.

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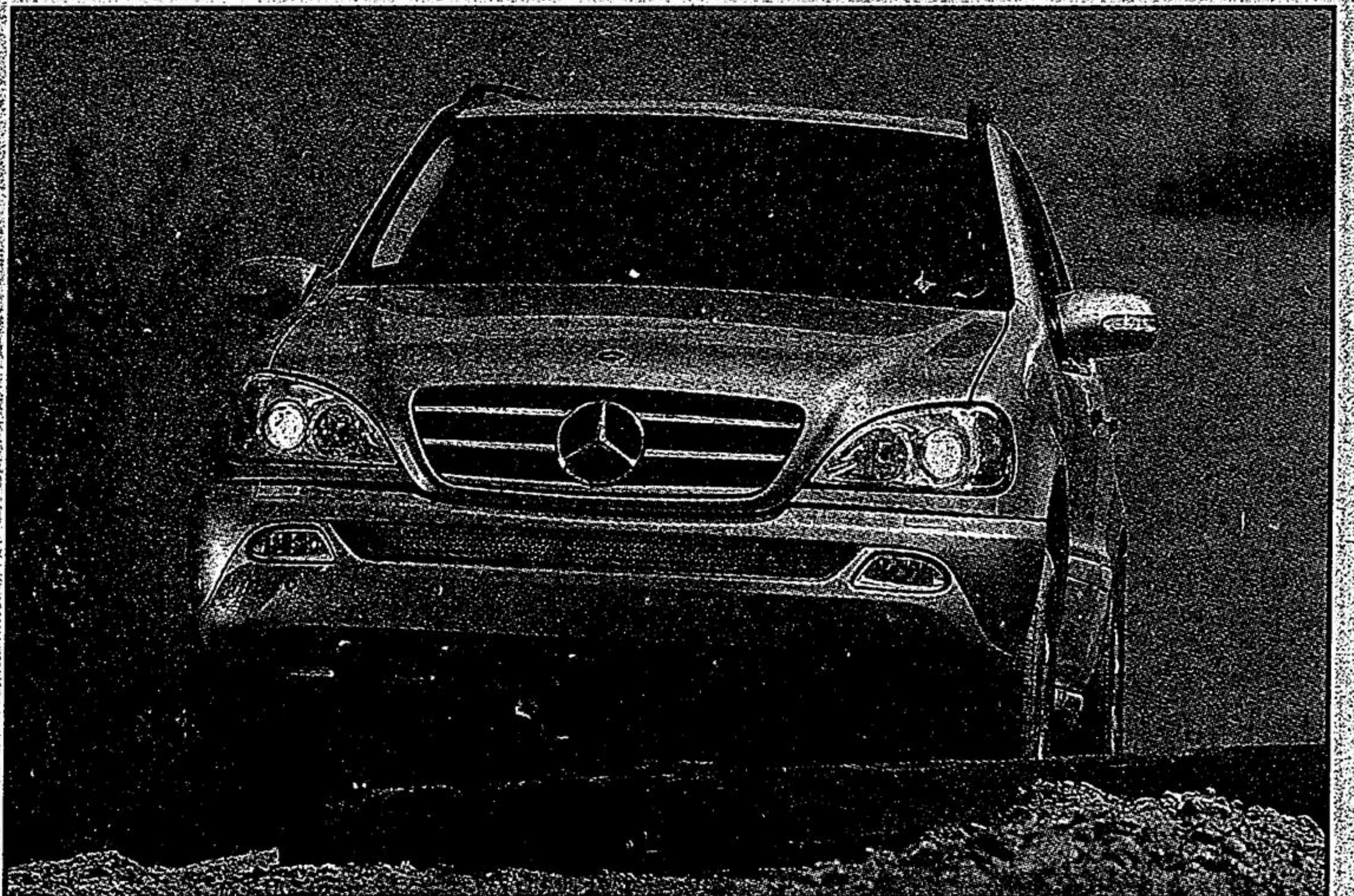
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