

Animals, fire rescue putting Dade in television spotlight

BY RISA POLANSKY

Miami-Dade's four-legged residents — and the county staffers charged with protecting them — are headed for reality TV stardom come the new year.

And Miami-Dade Fire Rescue isn't far behind.

"Miami Animal Cops," featuring the Miami-Dade Animal Services team, is to premiere 10 p.m. Jan. 4 on Animal Planet.

"Danger Coast," which focuses on the fire department's fireboat operations, is to hit airwaves in the spring on Country Music Television, known as CMT.

An air date has yet to be set.

The animal cops series "highlights the plight of the shelter animals and really the dedication of Animal Services staff," said Dr. Sara Pizano, veterinarian and Miami-Dade Animal Services director, in an interview Monday.

In 2004, Lion Productions filmed an earlier version of "Miami Animal Cops" for Animal Planet.

At the time, the county's police department handled animal control.

Now Miami-Dade Animal Services, a standalone department formed in 2005, is charged with combating animal cruelty issues here.

The department impounded more than 37,000 pets last year.

Generally, fewer than 1% get returned to owners — a "shameful" and confusing number, Dr. Pizano said.

She hopes exposure from the new TV show will lead to more lost animals being returned to owners, more spaying and neutering and more partnerships with other rescue agencies.

"We want to be put out of business," Dr. Pizano said. "That's our ultimate goal."

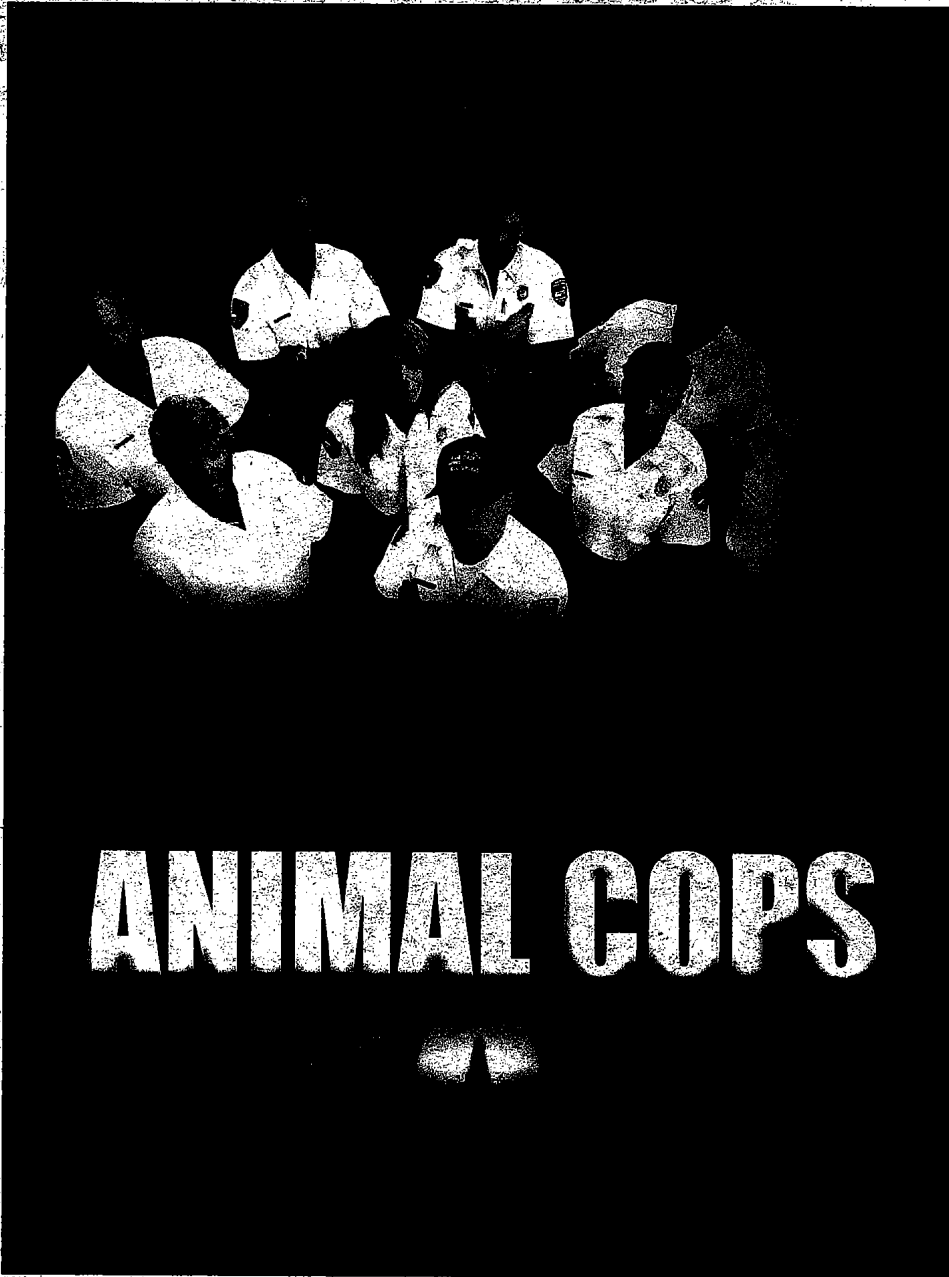
But while stray, lost and abused animals necessitate the department, staffers stay busy.

Film crews followed the action almost daily for about 10 months and wrapped up over the summer.

The work with Anglia Productions landed the department a \$50,000 donation to the Animal Services Trust Fund to buy pharmaceuticals for shelter pets.

Further payouts depend on whether the show sees a second run.

For now, viewers should look forward to an "intense" season, Dr. Pizano



Miami Animal Cops, featuring Dade Animal Services, is to air Jan. 4 on Animal Planet.

said. "The show follows certain animals from the time we investigate a cruelty case or tethering or something like that until sort of the end of the road at Animal Services."

The rescued animals could end up adopted, sent to a shelter or euthanized if they're suffering.

Miami-Dade's shelters work strictly with dogs and cats, but the show looks also at other agencies — including Miami-Dade Fire Rescue's Venom Response and the South Florida Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals — so viewers will see also horses and other farm animals, as well

as alligators, parrots, turtles and the like.

On top of raising awareness about pet care and the department's services, Dr. Pizano hopes the show will also dispel perceptions about animal control staff.

"In general, people don't think of animal control officers, or especially government shelter workers, as compassionate, but that's really not the case," she said.

Upcoming new series "Danger Coast" should also serve as an education tool for the public, fostering awareness of not only fire and emergency services but also fire safety, said Elizabeth

Calzadilla-Fiallo, media and public relations manager for Miami-Dade Fire Rescue.

Locally based 2C Media has been shooting since the Columbus Day Regatta and will be in production through May, President and Owner Chris Sloan said Tuesday.

Viewers can look forward to 10 "action-packed" episodes, he said.

CMT is looking to broaden its country focus and to highlight American heroes, and this new show is a fit, Mr. Sloan said, calling the fire department's off-shore rescuers "local heroes."

The series "shows this very unique operation [Marine Services] in a very positive light," he said.

Episodes are to cover the gamut when it comes to fire rescue calls — everything from search-and-rescue missions to boaters in peril, a heart attack on a cruise ship or a fuel spill on the Miami River.

"It's very action packed," he said. "It also brings a lot of production dollars into the market."

It's hard to cite a dollar value, Mr. Sloan said, but it's in the millions.

2C Media handles everything from shooting to post production here in South Florida.

And the company is working on other projects with Miami-Dade County, he added, though he said he could not share more information during negotiations.

The county's 311 Answer Center was also lined up for its own 15 minutes of fame when United Kingdom-based Darlow Smithson Productions came to town to film last year.

The company later decided a show based on the resident call center is a no-go for now, but the county is optimistic 311 will make its TV debut some day.

Crews captured the action at the Answer Center for about a week to film a short spot to pitch to producers, following calls from beginning to end.

They decided not to move forward with filming a pilot at the time, said Becky Jo Glover, assistant director of Miami-Dade's Government Information Center, but "I believe they'll continue to work on this one and try to come up with something."

So stay tuned.