

# Maremma Sheepdog Club of America



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Board

of

Please return this application to the above address.

## Directors Candidate Biography

Date: 10/7/21

Position(s) running for: President; will also fill in as VP or Director if needed

Name: Sarah E. Letts  
First MI Last

### Residence

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**Please share a brief biography:** Hello, fellow Maremma lovers! I am Sarah Letts and I am running for MSCA Club President.

I am a retired US Army officer, serving on both Active Duty and in the Reserves from 1981-2013, mother to four, grandma to one. I have deployed in combat numerous times and have won many military awards that won't mean much to most here. Raised in New England, I have a BS from Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA and completed ROTC at MIT. But my military career brought me West in 1985, and I settled in Arizona, and later earned an MS from University of Southern California. My military career sent me to over 60 countries in service of my nation. After I bought my retirement dream house in 2012, a homestead farm in the mountains of Southern California, I soon discovered that a well-run farm wasn't complete without an LGD. After researching LGDs extensively, I settled on the Maremma Sheepdog as my ideal breed and have not looked back since.

I am an experienced dog breeder. I started breeding wolf hybrids in Arizona in 1986, and have bred dogs ever since, including AKC registered and shown Champion Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs. I eventually grew disillusioned with the AKC, not believing they put enough emphasis on overall health rather than looks at shows, and allowing/encouraging the breeding of dogs that couldn't exist without artificial insemination. Since I had been breeding dogs for years, switching from Swissies to Maremmas was seamless, and while I miss my Swissies, I now devote all my time and energy to Maremmas.

I now have a small homestead of 16 acres with sheep, turkeys, chickens, bees, a cow and a horse. I gave pigs and goats a try, but they were too hard on my erosion-prone steep hills. My passion is my dogs, however, and I put most of my focus on my Maremma breeding program, the health, training, and socialization of my dogs. I have a high predator load of coyote packs, mountain lions, bobcats, eagles, hawks, owls, raccoons, weasels, skunks. Mountain lion attacks near my home have been an issue this year – a horse and donkey were attacked and a goat killed, at three different farms within my neighborhood. But I have NO concern for my stock with my Maremmas guarding my farm. No bears yet, but they are in the mountains all around my area and I keep bees, which are another type of stock Maremmas can guard from raccoons and bears.

Because I am retired, I am energized to invest more time into improving the Maremma breed and I hope to earn your vote as MSCA President.

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### **Experience you have that would be helpful in this Board position?**

- **Breeder since 1986**
- **30 years of experience in leadership and management**
- **Owner of many Maremmas**
- **Breeder of over 100 Maremma puppies**
- **Retired with the time to be MSCA Club President**

I fell in love with Maremmas the first time I met one. I had decided on the breed from a research perspective, but I wanted a hands-on introduction, and luckily a neighbor in my mountain farm and equestrian community had one. After buying a breeding quality girl from a West Coast breeder and a boy from an East Coast one, I bred generally 1-2 litters a year based on my demand, breeding only when I had a list of buyers. Growing my crew of breeding dogs happened slowly, but I now have multiple dogs and breeding options. In March of 2020, demand exploded as the pandemic changed things drastically. People who formerly lived in the city or suburbs were discovering they could Zoom to work from home and many realized their dreams of a homestead farm or ranch, moving in order to live a life closer to the land, address food insecurity, and just live a more purposeful life. And they soon learned, as I did, about the importance of security. My inquiries for Maremma pups quadrupled. I have been able to scale up somewhat to meet the needs of the many new folks starting a family farm, but I believe that the answer to increased demand is to mentor more ethical breeders, rather than let Maremmas be bred unregistered, so that the long term health of the breed is protected.

The more I expect of my Maremmas, the more they deliver. I think this breed is capable from being everything from loving pet, to therapy dog, to complete farm security. That

said, I personally made the decision to breed puppies strictly as farm guardians, whelped next to the chicken run, and exposed to other stock, turkeys, sheep, a cow and horse at 8 weeks. I have made the decision that unless a puppy has a physical or temperamental reason to not be a working guardian dog, I only sell to farms or ranches that will properly use the dogs for guarding. I do not demand that customers buy more than one dog or complete a certain training program because I started out new, too, with limited resources but a desire and love for the animals. I believe the best way to grow our community is to respect everyone's different situation and work to help them become owners of happy, healthy Maremmas.

While health testing was rare when I started, over time I decided to become a Code of Ethics Breeder. I now routinely do OFA (Orthopedic Foundation of America) hip xrays to test an entire litter at 4 months to determine which are breeding quality puppies. PennHip is another great test, but not feasible in my locale. I also include more hip, elbow and eye tests for breeding dogs later. All my OFA results are online and searchable at OFA.org under Sky Island Farm. When I had my original breeding pair tested, I was thrilled to find that they both had OFA Excellent hips. Now, their children and grand and great-grandchildren continue to carry those great genes forward. I have travelled to Europe to study the breed, and after researching pedigrees and breeders, I started an importing program to increase the breadth of Maremma DNA in the USA and imported dogs to add new pedigree lines to strengthen the US genetic health of the breed. I am excited now to volunteer to be a board member and steer the breed toward better health and strength for the future.

I feel extremely strongly about mentoring new breeders and puppy owners. I watch and read the Great Pyrenees rescue pages here in the US and the Maremma pages in Australia and realize that the Maremma breed could easily find itself in the same kind of trouble, where many are being bought as pets and then end up in a rescue situation because the size, barking, exercise needs, and energy are not what the buyer can handle. In Australia, most Maremmas are not registered, trained or used on farms, and many are euthanized in shelters. Mentorship is the key to a great experience for puppies and puppy buyers, and I really enjoy doing it. My buyers know that even if they have hours of questions, they will have my attention and support.

I also believe that as part of making the Small American Farm Dream a reality for many of my puppy buyers, I need to price my puppies at a cost that folks can afford, not insist that buyers invest in two at once, or insist on specific training. When I started, all I could afford for fencing was some electric net wire fence with a solar controller to activate it. I had a 5 month old Maremma behind that fence with 4 goats, and she did just fine. As I grew my farm, I added perimeter and pasture fencing, and dogs and stock to fill them. That original Maremma literally runs the security on my farm now, handling multiple other dogs in pastures and at large. I feel strongly that if existing breeders don't mentor and grow new ones, or if they make the barriers to ownership too high, the Backyard Breeders will explode and the number of Maremmas with poor health and temperament will increase, and like Great Pyrenees, they could be bred as pets and lose their expertise in guarding ability.

While I have developed my own strategies for breeding, raising and training my Maremmas, I feel strongly that there are many ways to do it right, and each owners' situations are unique. I try to work with all my puppy buyers to get them the dog(s) they need for their particular farms. Some need two dogs in a companion pairing, some

don't; some need a puppy trained to 4-5 months, while some want their puppy at 8 weeks to train with an older LGD they already own; breeder buyers want their pups with basic health testing first; some buyers have lots of stock; some have a small flock of chickens and a few smaller pets. One of my buyers is a Fortune 500 CEO with 8000 acres in Santa Barbara and I have sold him a breeding pair as he needs multiple dogs guarding all different kinds of stock. Another needed one dog on 2 acres for her small homestead to guard chickens and a smaller dog. I believe in being flexible and mentoring my new owners to maximize both their experience and the experience of their Maremma(s).

I now have the time and energy to become an engaged and involved supporter of the Maremma Sheepdog breed, and so I am asking for your vote as President of the MSCA.

### **Why do you want to hold this position on the Maremma Sheepdog Club of America Board of Directors?**

I believe I am qualified for the position of MSCA President given my proven leadership and communications skills, which I honed during 30 years of Army service. My love of the breed and my ability to look beyond my own needs and make decisions that are best for the club, Maremma owners and the Maremma Sheepdog breed also make me a qualified candidate. Club Board positions are positions of service. I intend to focus on the service I can do for the breed, club members and breeders.

Areas of focus that I think are important:

**Professionalism** – This includes respecting confidentiality of members, resolving issues with the board, seeking appropriate transparency so club members know what is going on. I will be fair, not holding grudges or favoring those I know, and being sure to support those who have different breeding and training practices. Good BOD's run quietly in the background without drama, supporting their members.

**Flexibility** – I will do my best to ensure the rules we make and enforce serve our club members and their dogs. I think that some of the approaches I have encountered by some breeders are extremely specific and inflexible as to training requirements or purchase of multiple dogs, and while that may work for them, I also support breeders and owners who have other methods and styles of breeding and training. The board should ensure that different approaches are not favored over others. On health testing, flexibility includes accepting both OFA and Pennhip, and not trying to prioritize one over the other, as many breeders only have one method available to them. Lastly, I am flexible in the time I can devote since I am retired and I homestead farm and breed Maremmas full time.

**Accountability** - the BOD should be accountable to members and do as much to be transparent as possible. To this end, I will commit to working toward re-starting monthly email updates, using the MSCA official facebook page and website to provide as much timely information as possible, and posting business and minutes of board meetings publicly.

**Growth** – now is a time of great growth in the demand for well bred LGDs, as a result of many families being able to work remotely and choosing to find some land and become more self-sufficient. I hope this period of "COVID homesteading" will bring back the

beauty and connection of the American family farm over time. The club needs to do outreach to the many new Maremma owners and stand up a mentorship program while growing our membership base. A larger club base will insure fresh new ideas and more people to volunteer for positions, sharing the load and becoming more responsive to member needs. I love the idea of standing up a monthly Zoom call where panels of experienced owners and breeders can teach new owners on training and feeding/care, while also taking questions from those researching the breed.

Dependability – I showed up in the Army for 30 years, through some pretty rocky times and scary and difficult moments while on combat tours. I'll show up for the club. I am not a dogmatic military type – meaning my days of ordering people around are behind me and I now seek consensus and participation. That said, I have no problem making decisions once the pertinent facts are known.

Suitability – Everyone has skills to offer – but not everyone's skills fit every job. I have honed the skills to run an organization, delegate tasks so the load is shared, and I have the vision to focus on the big picture as we seek to grow and support our membership. Other members will be way better than I in areas where they have skills and experience, and I hope a lot of members will participate in the process and run and vote and volunteer their time to the breed of dog they love. I trust members to figure out which candidate is suitable for which position based on experience.

Education – I think one of the primary purposes of the club is to educate and support members and breeders so that the Maremma Sheepdog breed prospers and remains healthy. I will actively support bringing back the newsletter, which I found helpful and informative. Having a forum on the group website or Facebook group for finding a mentor or asking basic questions that can form FAQs that we add to our page, making it a more current and user-friendly tool for LGD researchers and new Maremma owners is important to me. Helping people buy and what to look for, and how to train in a way that suits their needs, sample contracts, homestead-starter help...there are so many creative ways the club can support the education of Maremma owners.

I'm looking to create a robust mentorship and connection program so that new puppy buyers feel welcomed into the club and see its value for them. There are thousands of Maremmas in the USA now, but less than 150 club members.

**Any further information you would like the Membership to know about you?**

**I have spent countless hours on the phone mentoring puppy buyers. I have worked with training dogs that their buyers found difficult. I have created and initiated a system I use to retrain LDGs from food aggression, jumping, nipping, and a lot of other negative behaviors that I offer to my puppy buyers. I also lease out adult dogs to farms that need a puppy trainer, or an interim solution to security while waiting for their puppy. I am committed to making Maremma ownership as great an experience as possible... I watch them give their all every day, and I feel I owe a great debt to my amazing Maremmas.**

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**What is your vision for the future of the MSCA?**

**A dynamic, forward-looking, dependable flexible and HELPFUL organization built around the continued health and welfare of the majestic Maremma Sheepdog. I would**

**like to increase membership, mentorship and overall involvement in the club. I would like the MSCA to be seen as a vital and supportive organization that Maremma puppy buyers can't wait to join, and MSCA members can't wait to volunteer to help out.**

**What are your top 3 priorities for the MSCA in the next three years?**

**Growing our membership**\_\_\_\_\_

**Mentoring puppy buyers and new breeders**\_\_\_\_\_

**Insuring the health and long-term preservation of the working qualities of the Italian Maremma Sheepdog**\_\_\_\_\_

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