

# **2002-2003 GRAND JURY REPORT**

## **Department of Animal Services**

### **Background**

The mission and responsibility of the Department of Animal Services (DAS) is to “protect and serve the people and animals of Riverside County through programs that provide for public education, humane sheltering, responsible pet ownership, and progressive law enforcement.”

The DAS was a division within the Health Services agency until 1999, when it became a department. The department employs 104 personnel serving throughout the county and has an annual budget of over \$5 million funded by the county general fund and fees for such services as licenses and pet adoption. A large percentage of Riverside County homes have at least one domestic animal as a pet (usually a cat or dog). The Riverside County Integrated Project shows that the County’s population will increase at a steady rate over the next 20 years. As the County’s human population increases, so may the population of domestic animals, greatly increasing the workload and responsibility of the DAS.

The DAS has six basic programs:

1. A field operation program in which animal control officers (ACO) regularly deal with animal bites, injured, sick, and stray animals as well as protecting animals from abuse and neglect by their owners. DAS employees may assist the California Department of Fish and Game in controlling dangerous animals such as bears or mountain lions.
2. A shelter program in which the DAS manages animal shelters in Riverside and Blythe. There are two additional shelters under contract for dogs and cats located in San Jacinto and Lake Elsinore, and a temporary shelter for large animals (such as cattle and horses) in Nuevo.
3. A program for licensing dogs and inoculating them for rabies.
4. A spay-neuter clinic for preventing the rapid growth of the population of unwanted dogs and cats.

5. A DAS educational program to inform children in the public schools about the responsibilities of caring and feeding of animals, as well as the dangers associated with stray animals.
6. A volunteer program in which individuals work in the shelters and in the educational programs, assisting the department's professional staff.

## **Findings**

1. In late 2002, more than 70 horses were seized from one location because of allegations that the animals were suffering severe neglect. The horses were turned over to DAS for care at a temporary animal shelter in Nuevo. The unexpected and unbudgeted cost to DAS is estimated to be \$100,000 before the horses may be available for adoption or moved in a legal manner.
2. The DAS must cope with situations involving groups of large animals (such as horses or cattle) on an average of four to five times per month. This includes cattle that stray onto a highway or horses that are malnourished and suffering from neglect. Training is sporadic as incidents occur.
3. The DAS owns four stock trailers that can transport large animals. Parts of this equipment (such as loading ramps) have not always been in safe operating condition.
4. According to the Director of the Center for Equine Health at U.C. Davis, "West Nile Virus is expected to be a threat throughout the state this summer." The virus may be lethal to horses and is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito. The cost for vaccinating a horse for West Nile Virus is between \$75 - \$100 for the set of two shots.
5. The DAS states that informing students (K-12) about the responsibility of caring for animals often aids in reducing problems of animal abuse and over population.
6. Each year taxpayer money is spent to cope with pet over-population problems. Increased public awareness for the spay-neutering of pets will result in fewer unwanted animals and eliminate the need to euthanize.

## **Recommendations**

Board of Supervisors  
Department of Animal Services

1. Provide permanent training to the schedule for Animal Control Officers (ACO) in the handling of multi-animal incidents involving large animals (such as cattle and horses) and ensure that stock trailers are always maintained in proper operating condition.
2. Inform the horse owners in Riverside County of the serious dangers of West Nile Virus, provide information on the need for vaccinating, and be prepared to participate in control or eradication programs with other county and state agencies. Information should be provided on the DAS website and/or newspaper articles.
3. Vaccinate all horses and mules under the control and care of the DAS for West Nile Virus.