

Sheriff to become Del Norte's next dog catcher?

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Del Norte County Administrator Neal Lopez is seeking to shuffle the county's organization chart to take supervision of the Animal Services (Control) Department away from the Agricultural Commission and place it somewhere else.

The big question is, "Where?"

Lopez said that "over the past year, the Animal Services (Control) Department has struggled to meet the demand for services in our community due to severe staffing shortages and the lack of administrative support under the current structure."

According to the Del Norte County website, the Department of Animal Services enforces state laws, regulations, and county ordinances relating to domestic animals. "Activities include dog licensing, operating the county dog shelter, maintaining dog license and rabies vaccination records, impounding stray dogs and livestock, investigating dog bites, quarantining dogs that have bit, investigating loose or nuisance dog complaints, and livestock complaints," the website stated.

Other areas of responsibility include “licensing kennels, investigating potential violations of humane laws, picking up small dead animals for disposal from county roadways, and picking up injured domestic animals.”

Lopez’s office has regularly worked with the Agricultural Commissioner Justin Riggs “in an attempt to address many of the gaps that have been identified, and have had some successes and failures along the way.”

During this time, Lopez continued, “we have been unable to find a solution to resolve the additional administrative support we feel is needed for this department, and have determined the current structure has not adequately met the expectations of the community, the Board, the Department Head (Riggs) or the dedicated and hardworking staff in Animal Services (Control).”

Commissioner Riggs wears three hats: Agricultural Commissioner, Sealer of Weights and Measures, and Animal Services Director for Del Norte County. He agrees with County Administrator Lopez’s concerns.

“It is something I have been saying for years,” Riggs said.

Animal control has become “more of a law enforcement function rather than civil,” he said. “People regularly threaten animal control officers with guns and other weapons. Some officers wear vests, carry guns and other defensive equipment that scientists like us aren’t as familiar with.”

The position of agricultural commissioner and sealer of weights and measures requires 12 technical and management certifications, as well as a science degree, Riggs said. All but four of California’s 58 counties have removed animal control services from the responsibility of the agricultural commissioner.

“Agricultural issues are different than law enforcement issues,” he said.

Riggs emphasized the “very collaborative process of trying to improve services to the community,” especially when it has been difficult to recruit and retain new employees. Of those counties that moved Animal Services away from the Agricultural Commissioner, “many counties” have placed the department under the control of the Sheriff.

County Administrator Lopez indicated that this is a likely solution, although Code Enforcement is another possible placement. Lopez will assess the possible alternatives on the county organizational chart in time to present findings and recommendations to the Board of Supervisors at the scheduled August 23 meeting.