

Animal welfare

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Investigation of SPCA sought by Farm Bureau

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WATSONVILLE — The Farm Bureau is calling for a five-member task force to look into the animal-control policies of the Santa Cruz County SPCA.

Frustrated by what he says is a lack of enforcement in key areas of animal control, Farm Bureau President Tom Am Rhein said he wants each of the county supervisors to pick one member of the task force to evaluate the job the SPCA is doing.

SPCA Executive Director Doug Fakkema said he isn't sure what the point of the task force is.

"If it's because of the leg-hold trap, I don't think we're going to come to agreement. The proper place for that is in the legislative arena.

"If the concern is we don't have enough staff or personnel to handle the livestock problems, then I agree we need a task force. But that becomes a funding issue," he said.

The Farm Bureau has been at loggerheads with the SPCA over the use of steel jaw leg-hold traps ever since the county banned their use. Many ranchers, supported by the Farm Bureau, claim the traps are the best method of catching predators that prey on their livestock.

But Fakkema opposes their use because he said the traps are not selective and can cause damage to a rancher's own livestock, or an unsuspecting child.

The Farm Bureau has threatened to take the issue to court to determine if the county's ban on steel-jaw traps is valid.

While he opposes steel-jaw traps, Fakkema supports the Farm Bureau's recently released signs warning

pet owners that dogs bothering livestock will be shot.

"One of the best tools a rancher has is a rifle in trained hands," said Fakkema. "If a dog is out there attacking livestock, it should be shot. It can be a humane death if done properly. Livestock suffers horribly if being attacked by dogs."

Farm Bureau President Am Rhein said he thinks Fakkema's reasoning is inconsistent. "He (Fakkema) says it's inhumane to use a leg-hold trap but OK to come out and shoot (an animal)," Am Rhein said.

The Farm Bureau also cited complaints about the SPCA's pet adoption policies and the agency's attempt to regulate livestock.

Am Rhein complained that Fakkema has proposed such ideas as "pasture registration," whereby ranchers and livestock owners would have to register their pastures with the SPCA and disclose how many horses, cattle and sheep are on each parcel, and a "tagging program" to identify every livestock.

"These are pointless regulations," said Am Rhein. "They're talking about all these regulations while they aren't handling the stray-dogs problem. There's too much of the SPCA animal rights philosophy getting into daily operations. They should be an animal-control agency, not a special-interest group."

But Fakkema said the problem of animal control relates directly to funding. The SPCA operates with just six field personnel, one of whom is a supervisor.

"We have three people on duty a day, covering 220,000 people. All we're doing is jumping from one call to another."

Meanwhile, Am Rhein said the Farm Bureau is waiting for the Board of Supervisors to decide on the request for a task force.