

Agencies Look to Teamwork in Fight Against Illegal Animal Sales

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Near Santee Alley, baby rabbits with no protection from the heat wait to be sold. Selling animals has been a visible, and illegal, industry since the 1990s.

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES – Vendors illegally selling animals on Downtown streets rely on coordinated responses to avoid arrests. Now a herd of departments are countering with an organized strategy of their own.

On Monday, the city's Animal Services Commission approved a proposal that relies on signage, training and coordinated enforcement to combat illegal sales.

"It's rare to get a citation," Animal Services Captain Wendell Bowers told the board, describing how vendors often don't carry ID, making ordinances difficult to enforce.

Arrests leading to an actual prosecution, which carry a higher fine than a citation, are avoided by a sophisticated network of scouts on cell phones warning vendors, then giving an all-clear sign.

Vendors are sometimes aided by store owners fearful of exposing an escapee dodging in their store. "Then sometimes you just see people scattering, animals stuffed in a trash bag," said Bowers.

The Illegal Animal Sales Task Force proposal includes plans to post signs in areas active with illegal sales, including near suspicious pet stores. A motion for signs was introduced by Councilwoman Jan Perry in March -- but is still pending as departments unravel overlapping jurisdictions and, of course, the city's budget woes.

In the Fashion District, those jurisdictions include Animal Services, LAPD, the Fashion District BID and County Health Services, all who were present at the meeting held at L.A. Animal Services' office on Lacy Street, north of Downtown.

Included in the task force are the offices of Councilmember Ed Reyes, who represents Chinatown, a hotbed for the sale of small turtles that can be contaminated with salmonella; and the City Attorney, who in the report recommended that the courts, despite heavy caseloads, should take illegal animal sales more seriously and set higher bails.

The task force plans to cross-train LAPD and BID Security on the ordinances governing animal sales, said Senior Lead Officer Tracy Fisher, who was joined by LAPD Captain Blake Chow. Training will also focus on helping officers identify signs of animals under distress.

Jim Bickhart, representing the Mayor's office, said that all involved must begin to engage "the community in a more orderly and constructive manner" by creating methods that allow the public to report or call in any illegal animal offense.

The task force will report back to the Animal Services Commission in 180 days.