

Animal Shelter Manager Had "Off the Books" Arrangement With Animal Dealer

Update: Acquitted of animal abuse charges by a jury on April 1, 2009, former Tulare County animal shelter manager William Harmon was convicted on September 24, 2008 of two felony counts of accepting bribes, a felony count of embezzlement and the misdemeanor charge of accepting an unlawful gratuity. On May 12, 2009, Harmon was sentenced to 290 days in jail and 3 years probation.

Michael Sargeant was originally charged with two felony bribery charges, but on May 13, 2009, he pled no contest to one misdemeanor count of engaging in anti-competitive practices. He was sentenced to two days in jail (already served), three years of formal probation and a \$150 fine.

Case Details: (Visalia, California) Following a six-month investigation, an animal dealer, the Tulare County shelter manager and one employee are facing a combined total of 13 felony counts related to alleged animal cruelty and bribery.

Arrested in June 2007, Michael J. Sargeant, William R. Harmon, and Ron C. Cookson are accused of **participating in an "off the books" arrangement** wherein Harmon and Cookson carried out **unauthorized mass euthanasias** at the shelter – reportedly using nonstandard and painful methods – by falsifying records to cover their actions.

Sargeant, doing business as Sargeant's Wholesale Biologicals, buys carcasses from animal shelters and sells them to research facilities such as UC Davis' School of Veterinary Medicine. According to an investigative report by the Sheriff's Office, Sargeant admitted that he had not had an official contract with Tulare County Animal Control since 2002 and that contract had allowed him to take only feline carcasses, yet he had continued to acquire dog and cat carcasses frequently from the shelter whenever Harmon called to tell him that euthanized animals were ready for pick up. The report further stated that **Sargeant's company purchased \$1000 worth of gift certificates to a fancy restaurant and gave them to Harmon in 2005. He used a company check to purchase another \$1,000 gift certificate, which he gave to Harmon in 2006.**

Harmon was put on paid administrative leave. Cookson had been fired prior to his arrest; the single criminal count of felony animal cruelty he faced was dropped in September 2007.

Tulare County Superior Court
Case #VCF185453 - A and C