

## **AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROTECT VERMONT'S AGRICULTURE BRAND: ESTABLISHING AN ANIMAL WELFARE DIVISION**

**The Vermont Brand:** For FY24, Governor Scott proposed [major investments](#) in agriculture to support business entrepreneurship, growth, and sustainability, so that food producers and businesses are profitable across a range of sizes, stages, and business models, via

- \$10 million in grant funding for small and mid-sized agricultural producers and value-added processors to help them grow, become more efficient, and produce more food for the region;
- \$9.2 million for organic dairy farmers; and
- \$4 million, by the [Governor's Commission of Agriculture](#), for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund allowing food and forestry businesses expansion.

**Threats:** Gaps in animal welfare oversight threaten to undermine Vermont's notable brand. The intolerable goat farm situation described in the February [Charlotte News](#) and [The Citizen](#) is one vivid example. A patchwork of responsibilities and ambiguous authority, from state agencies to municipalities, risks allowing animal neglect and cruelty to become fodder for [animal rights activists](#) opposed to modern farming practices and livestock production.

Further, Vermont has no oversight for domestic pets importing into the state. According to the [American Veterinary Medicine Association](#) (AVMA), allowing the unregulated importation of rescued dogs poses zoonotic disease risks for animals and people as they may not have had the vaccinations and treatments they need to prevent disease. This increases the risk of Leishmaniasis, Babesiosis, Rabies, Ehrlichia, Echinococcus tapeworms, Heartworm and Brucellosis infections in Vermont.

The Senate Agriculture Committee noted at its March 14 meeting that an average of 500 animal welfare complaints are annually received in state. One third relate to livestock and 42% concern dogs. Despite this, there is no central regulatory authority responsible for ensuring domestic animal welfare in Vermont.

**A Path Forward:** After thorough study, the Governor's [Animal Cruelty Investigation Advisory Board](#) (ACIAB) advocated for 2022, Acts of 147, Section 38, mandating a complete report on the unification of animal welfare and public safety functions across state government. The comprehensive Report was filed in January with the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs, as a roadmap to effective solutions. It includes an inventory of animal welfare functions across 13 state agencies with associated staff job descriptions. The Report identifies serious gaps in the current multi-agency system<sup>1</sup>.

Moving specific responsibilities and associated resources under one new "Division of Animal Welfare" would be a *budget neutral step to begin* the elimination of systemic failures. A new Division could serve as a central location for animal welfare response and coordination, better supporting towns and municipalities when they need this guidance. *Future funding* could be directed towards standardized animal control training and enforcement at the local level. *For now, at a bare minimum*, we need to understand the costs currently associated with managing the existing patchwork of agencies and personnel involved.

### **The Report Proposes a FY24 Budget Neutral Change:**

· Earmark \$100,000 - \$120,000 from the Rabies Control Program at [20 V.S.A. § 3581\(f\)](#), to the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, with [20 VSA §3581a\(e\)](#), "Immunization" and the majority of responsibilities, to immediately establish a new Division of Animal Welfare, before the Treasurer disperses any remaining funds consistent with law as follows: 45% to the Department of Fish and Wildlife; 45% to the Department of Health; and 10% to the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets. (Report, page 36, footnotes 29 – 30).

- Establish and authorize a new Division of Animal Welfare full-time employee to serve as an educational resource, dog license compliance and Rabies Control Program advocate and effective animal welfare response coordinator.
- Require the 13 state agencies with animal welfare functions to discern tasks and report specific staff and operational funds budgeted annually in fulfilling their statutory responsibilities to the General Assembly.

**In Closing** At a minimum, we urge you this session to require the 13 agencies to document animal welfare-related tasks by percentage of each staff position performing them.

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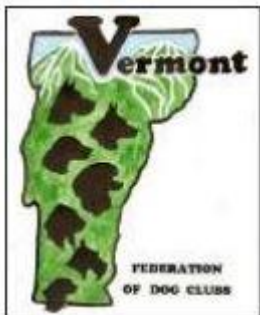
<sup>1</sup>For example, page 22 of the Report indicates an undefined “Commissioner” is responsible at [20 VSA §3813](#) for ensuring that reduced cost rabies clinics, with cooperation from veterinarians across the state, provide pets with access to affordable rabies vaccine.

**This Fact Sheet Provided By:**

**The Vermont Federation of Dog Clubs:** We are a Vermont nonprofit organization. While our mission is limited to responsible dog ownership, we strongly feel such a reorganization of all domestic animal welfare oversight in Vermont is necessary to improve state effectiveness and efficiency in these matters and to better assist localities.

**The Vermont Traditions Coalition:** Since 2001 the Vermont Traditions Coalition has advocated for the interests of Vermonters on several topics related to our shared land ethic. These connections to the landscape draw Vermonters together in support of many different interests, but one we can all agree on is the need to provide a space and responsibility within government for a centralized entity to address gaps in domestic animal welfare response. Our long-standing partnership with VT Federation of Dog Clubs has provided a clear window to the gaps in this system and the need to act.

**The American Kennel Club:** Founded in 1884, the American Kennel Club (AKC) is a recognized and trusted expert in canine health, breeding, and training. We advocate for the purebred dog as a family companion, advance canine health and well-being, protect the rights of dog owners, and promote the ideals of responsible dog ownership. We represent over 5,000 dog clubs nationally, including ten in Vermont. [www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org)



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