



*Charles H.  
Bronson*

***I would like to thank the Police Benevolent Association for inviting me to write a guest column for your fine organization. My roots in law enforcement extend back many years. I served as a Metro Dade County reserve deputy in the late 1970's and continued to support law enforcement issues as a state senator. Specifically, I supported bills increasing benefits for police officers such as the presumption bills and pay increases. I sponsored legislation allowing for a deputy sheriff to hold active their law enforcement certificate if they held elected office; co-sponsored legislation expanding the rights of officers during internal review investigations; sponsored legislation enhancing the penalty of using a police scanner to avoid detection during a crime or for impersonating an officer; and cosponsored legislation enhancing retirement benefits based on prior service.***

## **Wanted: Sky Divers**

*We want you if you are an LEO who is a licensed sky diver with USPA cards and are interested in being part of the 25-way formation skydive for the Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS) 25th anniversary celebration. The date and location of the event will be announced as soon as it has been confirmed.*

*Officers with a minimum of 200 jumps and the ability to raise \$1,000 for COPS should contact PO3 Greg Knott of the Montgomery County (MD) Police Dept. at [gkjumps4cops@comcast.net](mailto:gkjumps4cops@comcast.net). Please respond as soon as possible; we need your commitment to proceed.*

*You can find more information on COPS at [www.nationalcops.org](http://www.nationalcops.org)*

# *A Guest Article from Florida's* **Agriculture Commissioner**

**A**s Commissioner of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, I am very involved in law enforcement issues. Serving on the Cabinet, I oversee several law enforcement agencies including FDLE and the Florida Highway Patrol. I fully understand the challenges faced by officers who serve their communities and protect Florida's citizens. While the state population continues to grow and with it the number of crimes, often our budgets are not keeping pace and we must strategize about how to do more with less. I believe law enforcement throughout the state continually meets and exceeds these challenges.

While many citizens do not realize it, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services plays a role in their health and safety on a daily basis. Our inspectors are in the field ensuring we have a safe and wholesome food supply from farm to family table; they test petroleum products to ensure they meet the quality standards set by the state; we educate and protect consumers from con artists and unfair and deceptive business practices; and we ensure citizens who carry concealed weapons are properly permitted. FDACS also has nationally accredited laboratories whose main mission is to test for pathogens in food products. However, they have also assisted in investigations involving potential terrorist attacks including the anthrax cases in 2001.

Our Office of Agriculture Law Enforcement, an accredited law enforcement agency, is the first line of defense against people or things that could harm the state and its more than 16 million citizens and visitors. Agricultural Law Enforcement's responsibilities are as diverse as the agency itself, covering everything from plant and animals to matters of national security. The Office has changed considerably since it began inspecting agriculture products in 1935. Originally, roadside inspections were done on six major highways in the state. Today, we have approximately 260 professional sworn personnel who staff 23 inspection stations strategically located across the northern portion of Florida 24 hours a day year round.

The Office is responsible for conducting inspections of highway shipments of agricultural, horticultural, aquacultural and livestock commodities entering and leaving the state. They check to ensure no plant or animal pests or diseases are being transported and to verify that agriculture products leaving Florida comply with established quality standards. Officers inspect more than 11 million commercial vehicles that cross our borders each year. They are assisted in this effort with K-9 units and several VACIS (Vehicle and Cargo Inspection System) Units which use the latest gamma ray technology to enhance the inspection capabilities by x-raying a semi truck in less than 15 seconds. In addition to agriculture inspections, in recent years, officers have recovered nearly \$25 million in drugs, stolen goods and contraband at those locations. Individual seizures have included a \$7 million cocaine shipment, \$600,000 in stolen medicines, 60 stolen large-screen televisions and a truckload of stolen computer equipment. In August, AgLaw captured a fugitive on the U.S. Secret Service "Most Wanted List" in connection with a \$1.7 million dollar identity theft scam.

It is clear our traditional core mission of protecting Florida agriculture has expanded over the years. In addition to working the inspection stations, they also investigate consumer fraud, price gouging during disasters, enforce criminal and civil violations occurring within state forests or any crimes involving agriculture. AgLaw's Bureau of Investigative Services is also responsible for enforcement of laws governing such consumer issues as illegal telemarketing operations, sales of business opportunities, bogus charities, sellers of travel, motor vehicle repair fraud, health studios, dance studios, pawnshops, and moving & storage companies.

Domestic security operations are also now a priority. In June of this year, AgLaw was awarded accreditation status by the Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation after the commission conducted a vigorous review and found the agency in compliance with 276 recognized standards of excellence.

Our efforts to protect the public have allowed us to work in cooperation with many fine law enforcement agencies across the state and with the federal government.

The agency maintains a close working relationship with all 67 Sheriff Departments and 320 Municipal Police Departments throughout the state. The agency interacts with all state law enforcement agencies including the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Fish and Wildlife Commission, and the Department of Financial Services Division of State Fire Marshall. The agency also works cases with many federal agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Postal Service. Aglaw also is an active participant in all seven Regional Domestic Security Task Forces statewide.

But law enforcement must also rely on lawmakers and local governments to give them the tools needed to keep citizens safe. That means legislation and financial support to get the job done. And consumer crimes can be just as destructive as any other crimes when someone loses their life savings to a con artist.

Deceptive business practices, identity theft and other scams perpetrated by an increasingly high tech criminal element places all Florida consumers at risk. Florida, with our large elderly and foreign-born population, is particularly vulnerable to these types of crimes. We have worked with law enforcement and state attorneys to aggressively pursue those individuals who prey on Floridians, particularly our elderly population, and cost them their life savings. Our efforts have put a stop to many of these activities and secured refunds for consumers.

However, we need to continue to strengthen and expand our programs that protect consumers. I have sought additional funding from the Legislature to hire new workers in order to enhance our efforts geared toward consumer protection. In addition, we must take advantages of advances in technology that will provide new ways to improve communication and coordination between our department and other state and federal agencies that are charged with consumer protection. The reality is that criminals who prey on consumers cut across all governmental, law enforcement and geographic boundaries and they are taking advantage of technological advances and loopholes in dated laws to reach more targets. We also need to establish more task forces that involve multiple law enforcement jurisdictions. Bogus business opportunities, charities, travel agents etc. sweep through an area and by the time consumers realize they've been victimized and alert us, the perpetrators have moved on to new locations. More communication and cooperation will allow us to provide advance warning so we can be ready when they arrive in our area. We have to seek other innovative ways to help consumers as well as provide law enforcement with the tools necessary to investigate and prosecute consumer crimes. I work closely with the Legislature to update consumer protection laws such as the anti-spoofing law I successfully got approved during the 2006 legislative session.

Still, law enforcement agencies are well aware that we cannot legislate away consumer crimes. Another key to consumer protection is an informed public. I appreciate the fact that law agencies conduct public education programs during homeowners' association meetings, civic organization meetings and other public gatherings. Our Division of Consumer Services also has made public outreach a top priority. Through public service announcements, press releases, brochures and a speakers bureau, we continue to try and make people aware of the multitude of scams and other consumer crimes that plague our state. I think perhaps one of the most egregious consumer crimes that can be addressed through public education is identity theft. Educating people about how to protect their private information is much more cost effective than the unwieldy investigations that result when someone is victimized.

So whether people are in the grocery store, at the county fair, joining a gym or planning a move, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, its inspectors, investigators and law enforcement officers are on the job keeping our citizens and visitors safe from adulterated food, unfair and deceptive business practices and domestic security threats, a huge responsibility we take very seriously and are proud to undertake. ●