

DNA Legislation Linked to Local Killings

'Cornfed' Schneider's Refusal to Give Sample Spawns Bill

By Dawn Hobbs

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A string of unsolved homicides between Orange and Santa Barbara counties two decades ago -- possibly the work of a serial killer -- led to a proposed state law that would allow authorities to use "reasonable force" to take DNA samples from inmates.

State prison and local jail officials would not need court orders to take samples from convicted felons by force under SB 1242, a bill advanced Tuesday by a Senate committee.

The bill requires officials to videotape any forceful efforts to take the samples. Other safeguards would include developing a definition of reasonable force, guidelines for local jailers and requirements that supervisors approve any forced testing.

The legislation was prompted by an inmate, Paul "Cornfed" Schneider, who refused to provide samples for the state's DNA database. Mr. Schneider gained recent notoriety after two San Francisco attorneys, convicted last month in a dog-mauling case, adopted the then 38-year-old inmate at Pelican Bay State Prison shortly after last year's fatal attack.

In October 2000, Orange County detectives announced that the same person who killed two Goleta couples and tried to kill a third also may have killed a husband and wife in Ventura, a Laguna Niguel couple and two Irvine women. The Goleta cases involved the killing of Robert Offerman and Alexandria Manning in their Avenida Pequena condominium in 1979 and the double-murder of Gregory Sanchez and Cheri Domingo at their home on Toltec Way in 1981. Detective Larry Pool, who works on the Orange County department's "cold-case" team, said his quest began with Mr. Schneider, who is serving a life sentence on state charges of robbery and attempted murder.

"I was conducting a series of studies in 1998 looking at violent offenders in Orange, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties," said Detective Pool. "During that study, I found that Mr. Schneider was convicted of violent crimes in the Irvine area around the time of the Irvine murders. When I checked to see if he had blood taken and the DNA entered into the databank, he had not."

Detective Pool requested a sample and Mr. Schneider refused. The detective said he became interested in other potential suspects and didn't push the issue. But he returned to Mr. Schneider in February 2001 and made another request, which also was refused.

If there is enough evidence to link a suspect to a crime, authorities can obtain a warrant for his blood. However, the results of those tests may not be entered into the state's database to determine whether the suspect is responsible for any other crimes.

When the detective's request was refused again, he took his case to state Sen. James Brulte, R-Rancho Cucamonga, who authored the bill.

"We've now looked at over 7,000 people in this case and there are many we are currently seeking, aside from Mr. Schneider," said Detective Pool. "But the fact of the matter is that he qualifies to have his blood taken. It's absurd that violent felons sitting in prison can thumb their nose and say that you're not taking their blood.

"We identified this as a problem and a hurdle that we needed to get over and the Senate bill has come out of that," he said.

Santa Barbara sheriff's detectives concurred that there was likely a connection between the Goleta killings, but were not convinced the same person was responsible for the other killings because DNA collected in their investigations did not match DNA from those others.

Detective Pool says he would be "a bit surprised" if Mr. Schneider's DNA came back as a match for the unsolved homicides. He now suspects that killer is also the "East Area Rapist" believed responsible for committing 50 rapes in Northern California in the mid- to late-70s. Mr. Schneider does not match that person's age and height.

However, Detective Pool said that whoever the killer may be, he has linked three of the double-murders by DNA.

"Those six murders are also potentially linked to the two double-homicides in Santa Barbara by virtue of method of operation and the suspect's physical and behavioral description," he said.

These murders are then linked, he said, to three of the 50 rapes in the Sacramento and Contra Costa county areas by DNA, and to the remaining 47 rapes by method of operation.

Meanwhile, authorities at the Santa Barbara County Jail believe the legislation, if passed, would have little effect on their operation.

Three years ago, the creation of a statewide DNA database was approved. Sheriff's Lt. Dominick Palera set up a local program that began with the collection of samples from registered sex offenders, and later other types of offenders.

"If someone is going to be housed at our facility, we run a criminal history and flag the ones that qualify," said Lt. Palera. "We wait until we have at least three or four people and then have someone come in and take the sample."

So far, officials at the County Jail have had no refusals.

"Everyone's been cooperating," he said.

"People in County Jail don't want to make waves because they have things pending ... Most people coming in here do have something to lose. At state prisons, they generally don't."