

Article 2.

Record and Disposition of Seized, etc., Articles.

§ 15-11. Sheriffs and police departments to maintain register of personal property confiscated, seized or found.

Each sheriff and police department in this State is hereby required to keep and maintain a book or register, and it shall be the duty of each sheriff and police department to keep a record therein of all articles of personal property which may be seized or confiscated by him or it, or of which he or it may have become possessed in any way in the discharge of his duty. Said sheriffs and police departments shall cause to be kept in said registers a description of such property, the name of the person from whom it was seized, if such name be known, the date and place of its seizure, and, where the article was not taken from the person of a suspect or prisoner, a brief recital of the place and circumstances concerning the possession thereof by such sheriff and police department. Such sheriff and police department shall also keep in said register appropriate entries showing the manner, date, and to whom said articles are disposed of or delivered, and, if sold as hereinafter provided, a record showing the disposition of the proceeds arising from such sale. (1939, c. 195, s. 1; 1973, c. 1141, s. 3.)

§ 15-11.1. Seizure, custody and disposition of articles; exceptions.

(a) If a law-enforcement officer seizes property pursuant to lawful authority, he shall safely keep the property under the direction of the court or magistrate as long as necessary to assure that the property will be produced at and may be used as evidence in any trial. Upon application by the lawful owner or a person, firm or corporation entitled to possession or upon his own determination, the district attorney may release any property seized pursuant to his lawful authority if he determines that such property is no longer useful or necessary as evidence in a criminal trial and he is presented with satisfactory evidence of ownership. If the district attorney refuses to release such property, the lawful owner or a person, firm or corporation entitled to possession may make application to the court for return of the property. The court, after notice to all parties, including the defendant, and after hearing, may in its discretion order any or all of the property returned to the lawful owner or a person, firm or corporation entitled to possession. The court may enter such order as may be necessary to assure that the evidence will be available for use as evidence at the time of trial, and will otherwise protect the rights of all parties. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, photographs or other identification or analyses made of the property may be introduced at the time of the trial provided that the court determines that the introduction of such substitute evidence is not likely to substantially prejudice the rights of the defendant in the criminal trial.

(b) In the case of unknown or unapprehended defendants or of defendants willfully absent from the jurisdiction, the court shall determine whether an attorney should be appointed as guardian ad litem to represent and protect the interest of such unknown or absent defendants. Appointment shall be in accordance with rules adopted by the Office of Indigent Defense Services. The judicial findings concerning identification or value that are made at such hearing whereby property is returned to the lawful owner or a person, firm, or corporation entitled to possession, may be admissible into evidence at the trial. After final judgment all property lawfully seized by or otherwise coming into the possession of law-enforcement authorities shall be disposed of as the court or magistrate in its discretion orders, and may be forfeited and either sold or destroyed in accordance with due process of law.

(b1) Notwithstanding subsections (a) and (b) of this section or any other provision of law, if the property seized is a firearm and the district attorney determines the firearm is no longer necessary or useful as evidence in a criminal trial, the district attorney, after notice to all parties known or believed by the district attorney to have an ownership or a possessory interest in the firearm, including the defendant, shall apply to the court for an order of disposition of the firearm. The judge, after hearing, may order the disposition of the firearm in one of the following ways:

- (1) By ordering the firearm returned to its rightful owner, when the rightful owner is someone other than the defendant and upon findings by the court (i) that the person, firm, or corporation determined by the court to be the rightful owner is entitled to possession of the firearm and (ii) that the person, firm, or corporation determined by the court to be the rightful owner of the firearm was unlawfully deprived of the same or had no knowledge or reasonable belief of the defendant's intention to use the firearm unlawfully.
- (2) By ordering the firearm returned to the defendant, but only if the defendant is not convicted of any criminal offense in connection with the possession or use of the firearm, the defendant is the rightful owner of the firearm, and the defendant is not otherwise ineligible to possess such firearm.
- (3) By ordering the firearm turned over to be destroyed by the sheriff of the county in which the firearm was seized or by his duly authorized agent if the firearm does not have a legible, unique identification number or is unsafe for use because of wear, damage, age, or modification. The sheriff shall maintain a record of the destruction of the firearm.
- (4) By ordering the firearm turned over to a law enforcement agency in the county of trial for (i) the official use of the agency or (ii) sale, trade, or exchange by the agency to a federally licensed firearm dealer in accordance with all applicable State and federal firearm laws. The court may order a disposition of the firearm pursuant to this subdivision only if the firearm has a legible, unique identification number. If the law enforcement agency sells the firearm, then the proceeds of the sale shall be remitted to the appropriate county finance officer as provided by G.S. 115C-452 to be used to maintain free public schools. The receiving law enforcement agency shall maintain a record and inventory of all firearms received pursuant to this subdivision.

This subsection (b1) is not applicable to seizures pursuant to G.S. 113-137 of firearms used only in connection with a violation of Article 22 of Chapter 113 of the General Statutes or any local wildlife hunting ordinance.

(b2) Notwithstanding subsections (a), (b), and (b1) of this section or any other provision of law, if the property seized is retail property or other property that is evidence of a violation of Article 16, Article 16A, or Article 18 of Chapter 14 of the General Statutes, or a violation of G.S. 14-100, upon request of the lawful owner or a person, firm, or corporation entitled to possession or upon his own determination, the district attorney may make application to the court for an order authorizing the return of the property to the lawful owner or person, firm, or corporation entitled to possession prior to any trial of the offenses for which the property was seized as evidence. Upon application to the court, the district attorney shall notify the defendant of the request for return of the property and provide the defendant 10 business days to inspect and photograph the property. The court, after notice to all parties, including the defendant, and after

hearing, shall order any or all of the property returned to the lawful owner or a person, firm, or corporation entitled to possession if the court finds all of the following:

- (1) The defendant has been given notice and an opportunity to inspect and photograph the property prior to the hearing.
- (2) Photographs or other identification or analyses made of the property will provide sufficient evidence at the time of trial.
- (3) The introduction of such substitute evidence is not likely to substantially prejudice the rights of the defendant in the criminal trial.
- (4) There is satisfactory evidence of ownership.

Photographs or other identification or analyses made of any property returned pursuant to this subsection shall be presumed admissible in lieu of the actual property at any subsequent criminal trial for violation of Article 16, Article 16A, or Article 18 of Chapter 14 of the General Statutes, or violation of G.S. 14-100. Any property returned pursuant to this subsection does not need to be made available for evidence at the time of trial and may be sold or disposed of in any lawful manner by the lawful owner or person, firm, or corporation entitled to possession.

(c) Any property, the forfeiture and disposition of which is specified in any general or special law, shall be disposed of in accordance therewith. (1977, c. 613; 1979, c. 593; 1994, Ex. Sess., c. 16, s. 1; 2000-144, s. 27; 2005-287, s. 1; 2013-158, s. 1; 2014-115, s. 24.5; 2022-30, s. 4.)

§ 15-11.2. Disposition of unclaimed firearms not confiscated or seized as trial evidence.

(a) Definition. – For purposes of this section, the term "unclaimed firearm" means a firearm that is found or received by a law enforcement agency and that remains unclaimed by the person who may be entitled to it for a period of 30 days after the publication of the notice required by subsection (b) of this section. The term does not include a firearm that is seized and disposed of pursuant to G.S. 15-11.1 or a firearm that is confiscated and disposed of pursuant to G.S. 14-269.1.

(b) Published Notice of Unclaimed Firearm. – When a law enforcement agency finds or receives a firearm and the firearm remains unclaimed for a period of 180 days, the agency shall publish at least one notice in a newspaper published in the county in which the agency is located. The notice shall include all of the following:

- (1) A statement that the firearm is unclaimed and is in the custody of the law enforcement agency.
- (2) A statement that the firearm may be sold or otherwise disposed of unless the firearm is claimed within 30 days of the date of the publication of the notice.
- (3) A brief description of the firearm and any other information that the chief or head of the law enforcement agency may consider necessary or advisable to reasonably inform the public about the firearm.

(c) Repealed by Session Laws 2013-158, s. 2, effective September 1, 2013, and applicable to any firearm found or received by a local law enforcement agency on or after that date and to any judicial order for the disposition of any firearm on or after that date.

(d) Disposition of Unclaimed Firearm. – If the firearm remains unclaimed for a period of 30 days after the publication of the notice, then the head or chief of the law enforcement agency shall order the disposition of the firearm in one of the following ways:

- (1) By having the firearm destroyed if the firearm does not have a legible, unique identification number or is unsafe for use because of wear, damage, age, or modification and will not be disposed of pursuant to subdivision (3) of this

subsection. The head or chief of the law enforcement agency shall maintain a record of the destruction of the firearm.

- (2) By sale, trade, or exchange by the agency to a federally licensed firearm dealer in accordance with all applicable State and federal firearm laws or by sale of the firearm at a public auction to persons licensed as firearms collectors, dealers, importers, or manufacturers. The head or chief of the law enforcement agency shall dispose of the firearm pursuant to this subdivision only if the firearm has a legible, unique identification number.
- (3) By maintaining the firearm for training or experimental purposes or transferring the firearm to a museum or historical society.

(e) Repealed by Session Laws 2013-158, s. 2, effective September 1, 2013, and applicable to any firearm found or received by a local law enforcement agency on or after that date and to any judicial order for the disposition of any firearm on or after that date.

(f) Disbursement of Proceeds of Sale. – If the law enforcement agency sells the firearm pursuant to subdivision (2) of subsection (d) of this section, then the proceeds of the sale shall be retained by the law enforcement agency and used for law enforcement purposes. The receiving law enforcement agency shall maintain a record and inventory of all firearms received pursuant to this section, as well as the disposition of the firearm, including any funds received from a sale of a firearm or any firearms or other property received in exchange or trade of a firearm. (2005-287, s. 2; 2013-158, s. 2; 2013-410, s. 17(a); 2014-115, s. 2.)

§ 15-12. Publication of notice of unclaimed property; advertisement and sale or donation of unclaimed bicycles.

(a) Unless otherwise provided herein, whenever such articles in the possession of any sheriff or police department have remained unclaimed by the person who may be entitled thereto for a period of 180 days after such seizure, confiscation, or receipt thereof in any other manner, by such sheriff or police department, the said sheriff or police department in whose possession said articles are may cause to be published one time in some newspaper published in said county a notice to the effect that such articles are in the custody of such officer or department, and requiring all persons who may have or claim any interest therein to make and establish such claim or interest not later than 30 days from the date of the publication of such notice or in default thereof, such articles will be sold and disposed of. Such notice shall contain a brief description of the said articles and such other information as the said officer or department may consider necessary or advisable to reasonably inform the public as to the kind and nature of the article about which the notice relates.

(b) Notwithstanding subsection (a) of this section or Article 12 of Chapter 160A of the General Statutes, when bicycles which are in the possession of any sheriff or police department, as provided for in this Article, have remained unclaimed by the person who may be entitled thereto for a period of 60 days after such seizure, confiscation or receipt thereof, the said sheriff or police department who has possession of any such bicycle may proceed to advertise and sell such bicycles as provided by this Article, or may donate such bicycles to a charitable organization exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. If the bicycles are to be donated, the notice shall state that as the intended disposition if they are not claimed. (1939, c. 195, s. 2; 1965, c. 807, s. 1; 1973, c. 1141, s. 4; 1997-180, s. 1.)

§ 15-13. Public sale 30 days after publication of notice.

If said articles shall remain unclaimed or satisfactory evidence of ownership thereof not be presented to the sheriff or police department, as the case may be, for a period of 30 days after the publication of the notice provided for in G.S. 15-12, then the said sheriff or police department in whose custody such articles may be is hereby authorized and empowered to sell the same at public auction for cash to the highest bidder, either at the courthouse door of the county, the county law enforcement headquarters if the sale is conducted by the sheriff, or at the police headquarters of the municipality in which the said articles of property are located, and at such sale to deliver the same to the purchaser or purchasers thereof. (1939, c. 195, s. 3; 1973, c. 1141, s. 5; 1991, c. 531, s. 2.)

§ 15-14. Notice of sale.

Before any sale of said property is made under the provisions of this Article, however, the said sheriff or police department making the same shall first advertise the sale by publishing a notice thereof in some newspaper published in the said county at least one time not less than 10 days prior to the date of sale, and by posting a notice of the sale at the courthouse door and at three other public places in the said county. Said notice shall specify the time and place of sale, and contain a sufficient description of the articles of property to be sold. It shall not be required that the sale lay open for increase bids or objections, but it may be deemed closed when the purchaser at the sale pays the amount of the accepted bid. (1939, c. 195, s. 4; 1973, c. 1141, s. 6.)

§ 15-14.1. Sale of property through electronic auction.

In addition to selling property as authorized in G.S. 15-13, a sheriff or police department may sell property in his or its possession through an electronic auction service. The sheriff or police department shall comply with the publication and notice requirements provided in G.S. 15-12 through G.S. 15-14 prior to any sale under this section. (2003-284, s. 18.6(c).)

§ 15-15. Disbursement of proceeds of sale.

From the proceeds realized from the sale of said property, the sheriff, police department or other officer making the same shall first pay the costs and expenses of the sale, and all other necessary expenses incident to a compliance with this Article, and any balance then remaining from the proceeds of said sale shall be paid within 30 days after the sale to the treasurer of the county board of education of the county in which such sale is made, for the benefit of the fund for maintaining the free public schools of such county. (1939, c. 195, s. 5; 1973, c. 1141, s. 7.)

§ 15-16. Nonliability of officers.

No sheriff, police department, or other officer shall be liable for any damages or claims on account of any such sale or disposition of such property, as provided in this Article. (1939, c. 195, s. 6; 1973, c. 1141, s. 8.)

§ 15-17. Construction of Article.

This Article shall not be construed to apply to the seizure and disposition of whiskey distilleries, game birds, and other property or articles which have been or may be seized, where the existing law now provides the method, manner, and extent of the disposition of such articles or of the proceeds derived from the sale thereof. (1939, c. 195, s. 7.)