

Six arrested, hundreds of animals seized in Loxahatchee farm raids

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LOXAHATCHEE —

Six people were arrested Tuesday morning after an investigation by an animal rights group found that three local farms were brutalizing animals, including illegally slaughtering horses, boiling live pigs and stomping ducks to death.

Palm Beach County Sheriff's deputies seized 750 animals during morning raids at the three farms. Those arrested were not identified but are expected to face charges that include animal cruelty.

The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office has confirmed there have been arrests made at the three farms in Loxahatchee.

"This is one of the ghastliest tortures of animals that we have ever seen," said Richard Couto, who led the undercover operation for the Miami-based Animal Recovery Mission

(ARM). “We’re talking about some of the most heinous acts possible that took place in front of our investigators,”

Using hidden cameras, ARM investigators filmed the alleged slaughter of animals at Rancho Garcia (15703 Orange Boulevard), G.A. Paso Fino (14873 Collecting Canal Road) and Medina Farm (2151 C Road).

In one clip provided by ARM and filmed at Medina Farm, a cow is shot in the head, has its throat cut, then while still alive has a rope placed around its partially severed neck before being dragged out of its holding pen by a pick-up.

Other animals, such as goats, rams, ducks and pigs were also tortured and killed, the lead investigator said.

Couto said the farms were slaughtering horses and selling the meat for human consumption. State law makes it a third-degree felony for anyone to buy, sell, transport, kill a horse or possess horse meat for human consumption.

ARM shared its findings three weeks ago with the sheriff’s office, which followed by serving search warrants Tuesday on the farms.

Several residents showed up at Rancho Garcia Tuesday to voice their disgust.

“These people, I pray they go to jail and they don’t get bonds,” said Debbie Hogg, who lives nearby. “Treat them as murderers. They are murderers.”

Chyloe Light said she lived and worked at Rancho Garcia for most of the past two years. Conditions at the farm were deplorable, Light said, and some animals were starved or fed garbage. When she raised questions about the animals’ well-being, she was told to mind her own business.

Light said she decided to leave the farm two months ago after she found fresh blood in a cock-fighting ring on the property. According to the sheriff’s office, among the animals seized Tuesday were “fighting roosters.” But the extent of alleged animal cruelty at the farm wasn’t known to Light until Tuesday’s raids.

“I’m just overwhelmed right now,” Light said. “I’m shaking.”

Records show that the owner of Garcia Farms is Jorge Garcia. According to court documents, the 48-year-old Garcia was arrested in 2003 on grand theft and animal cruelty charges. Adjudication was withheld in the case although Garcia was on probation until April 2007. It’s unclear if the probation stint was connected to the animal cruelty charge.

Garcia could not be reached for comment Tuesday. It’s not known if he was among those arrested in the raid.

Hogg, who lives a few blocks from Garcia Farms, said she's complained to authorities for years about the farm.

She said she visited the farm with a friend recently and found the conditions "disgusting."

"You can smell the death," Hogg said. "It's really sad. If you're an animal person, it really (angers you)."

Couto said his investigators filmed animals being dragged, beaten, gutted, boiled, skinned and hoisted in the air while alive.

"It's impossible to shut these places down without video evidence," said Couto, adding that his organization has helped shutter 135 similar operations across the state. He said the horse meat business is very profitable. Horse meat goes for as much as \$40 a pound, he said.

Rachel Ibarra, executive director of the horse rescue organization Nature Speaks in Jupiter Farms, said horse meat is particularly dangerous for humans because the animals are often treated with vaccinations, de-worming medication and anesthesia.

"Nobody should be eating horses," said Ibarra, adding her organization uses rescue horses to work with at-risk kids and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress.

The horses allegedly slaughtered at the three Loxahatchee farms were obtained through various methods including the thoroughbred industry and on Craigslist, Couto said.

Ibarra said that horse rescue groups and other organizations that "re-home" the animals need to be more careful.

"They may be telling them that they're going to good homes and they don't know that they're going to slaughter," Ibarra said. "These animals are majestic and they help save people, so why are we not making an effort to save them?"