

## Cops arrest two and seek a third accused of illegally butchering animals in a farm in South Miami-Dade

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The day before Christmas, Richard Couto wanted to buy a pig. But instead of visiting a local supermarket he entered the gates of Coco Farm just west of Florida's Turnpike.

There, a man captured a live pig from a pen filled with several others, slammed its head to the floor, tied a rope around its legs, stepped on its head, then stabbed it in the heart.

But Couto wasn't a regular customer, he's the founder of an animal rescue mission. And Coco Farm isn't a regular slaughterhouse, it's an illegal one according to police, one that operated with illegal structures and without permits.

Thursday, when Miami-Dade police descended on the property they found dead and partially eaten animals throughout its 200 acres at 11800 NW 41st St. They also recovered about 3,000 animals, mostly pigs, goats, chickens and cows.

Only about 100 of them will be euthanized. The other 2,900 will be doled out to different sanctuaries around the state in what Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle called the largest animal rescue mission in the U.S.

“This is so ghastly, barbaric. There were rotting carcasses, animals eating each other,” said Fernandez Rundle. “I only looked at some of the video. I couldn’t look at all of it.”

Also removed from the property that police said had seven illegal structures on it were one of its owners and a worker. Both were at the slaughterhouse when police arrived and gave themselves up without a fight. The main slaughterhouse was a building on the property’s southwest corner. Police said workers used other buildings to hang animals, slit their throats and let me bleed out. The pigs were often boiled on site.

Pigs sold for \$180, goats for \$160. There was a \$20 kill charge.

Arrested were Gregorio Santa Ana, 69, charged with 21 counts of cruelty to animals, three counts of illegally confining them without food and water and two counts of illegally shackling them with intent to kill. He was jailed and his bond was set at \$169,000. Also arrested was Jose Armando Solis, 35, who was charged with five counts of cruelty to animals and two counts of confining them without food or water.

Police continue to look for another of the farm’s owners, Ruben Rodriguez, 67, who is facing charges of six counts of animal cruelty, two counts of illegally shackling an animal with intent to kill, and a single count of confining an animal improperly. His bond is expected to be \$62,000, prosecutors said.

According to the arrest warrant, Couto, the founder of the Animal Recovery Mission and who roams the country exposing illegal operations and animal cruelty, visited the farm a total of four times between Christmas Eve and early February. Sometimes he carried a hidden surveillance tape. Other times he simply kept inventory in his head.

During one visit on New Year’s Eve, police investigators visited the property and found Santa Ana in the office quarters watching a video camera system that had views of the entire farm. When an officer inquired about purchasing a pig, the warrant says, he was led to a truck stuffed with 45 animals. There was no food or water.

At that point, the affidavit says, a man “grabbed a pig from the trailer and stomped and kneeled on the pig while tying rope around its feet.” The pig was weighed on site before being carried to a slaughterhouse where it was stabbed in the heart. Then they were placed in boiling water “while one pig clearly showed signs of life.”

Fernandez Rundle and Couto said the killing and selling of unregulated meat isn't only an animal cruelty issue.

This is a public safety issue," Couto told local television station WSVN Channel 7. "Much of this meat was going into our food chain. The animals were deceased. They were sick. They were being butchered in some of the most vile, disgusting areas possible."

Police made a similar series of arrests last August in West Miami-Dade after finding pigs had been shot, stabbed, beaten with sledgehammers and gutted and boiled while alive on the property. That investigation, which was also led by Couto, resulted in three arrests mostly for animal cruelty.

Couto founded ARM in 2010 while serving as an investigator for the local chapter of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He now resides on Miami Beach.