

State: Pigs butchered in “ghastly” manner in illegal West Miami-Dade slaughterhouse

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Raul Fernandez

At an illegal slaughterhouse in West Miami-Dade, pigs were shot, stabbed, beaten with sledgehammers and gutted and boiled while alive, authorities said Wednesday. An undercover investigation, conducted by the private group Animal Recovery Mission and Miami-Dade police, resulted in the arrest Wednesday of the slaughterhouse's operator.

Raul “Freaky” Fernandez, 53, was charged with seven felony counts of animal cruelty. The private investigators posing as customers captured the alleged abuse on hidden video just before Christmas, when demand for whole pigs for roasting is high. The latest investigation was dubbed Operation Noche Buena, Spanish for Christmas Eve, said mission founder Richard Couto.

“It’s monstrous. These operators are savages with no sense of humanity,” said Couto.

He spoke to media gathered outside the shut-down slaughterhouse, which is located in Northwest Miami-Dade west of the Florida Turnpike and north of Okeechobee Road — a sprawling, sparsely populated rural swath that has long been a hot spot for similar illegal operations.

The arrest warrant spilled over with grisly details: “On video surveillance, pigs can be seen being dragged, hook-mouthed through the jaw, at distances of approximately 150 feet, all while the animals remain alive.”

In one example, an undercover operative agreed to buy a boar, which was then shot with a “small-caliber” rifle. The animal did not die, but instead thrashed and kicked for three minutes as it was dragged over 150 feet, the warrant said.

In another example, a pig – after being hammered and stabbed – was thrown into a vat of boiling water while still showing signs of life, the warrant said. An employee used a shovel to hold the pig under water, police said.

“No legitimate slaughterhouse operator or any self-respecting farmer would treat his livestock in such a ghastly manner,” Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle said in a statement.

Fernandez, the alleged operator of the slaughter on the 17700 block of Northwest 137th Avenue, was jailed on Wednesday afternoon. It was unknown if he had retained a lawyer. He is currently on probation on a conviction for marijuana trafficking.

Unlicensed slaughterhouses have become commonplace in western parts of Miami-Dade County, where authorities in recent years have busted offenders for illegally butchering and selling horse meat, pigs and chickens.

This is not the first local operation led by Animal Recovery Mission that has led to arrests.

In November, Hialeah slaughterhouse owner Rudesino “Rudy” Acosta pleaded guilty and accepted 10 years of probation after Couto filmed the slaughter of some animals in 2011.

A line of television news satellite trucks crowded the street outside the agricultural property on Wednesday. Couto, dressed in a black-SWAT-style outfit, said at the scene that his group had investigated similar allegations there in 2009 and 2010. No arrests were made but the owners were issued code violations and the farm was shut down.

The owners then leased it to Fernandez, who continued to run the operation despite more code violations being levied in November.

Couto said the slaughter of the animals was so violent and inhumane that four of his undercover operators quit after the probe.