

Jurors in slaughterhouse owner's trial see video of goat being killed

By Daphne Duret - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer Posted: 9:11 p.m. Tuesday, March 29, 2016



WEST PALM BEACH — In a video played for a Palm Beach County jury Tuesday, a brown and white billy goat bucked his head up and backward, as if the movement could somehow free his hind legs from the rope that held him upside down in mid-air.

On the dirty floor below him, the growing pool of blood from his slit throat told everyone in the room what the struggling animal had yet to accept.

There was no way he was getting away. Ever.

For Rancho Garcia owner Jorge Luis Garcia, whose jury in his animal cruelty trial is expected to resume deliberations Wednesday, the video depicted a summer day's work at the Loxahatchee slaughterhouse he ran until an October raid ended with his arrest along with at least a half-dozen others.

Most of the others have pleaded guilty for their roles in the alleged nonhumane killing of animals and have received short jail sentences or probation. Only Garcia and Rafael Ramirez, who also faces a charge of illegally possessing and selling horse meat, have decided to take their cases to trial.

In the daylong trial Tuesday, prosecutors told jurors that the problem wasn't that Garcia slaughtered two goats. It's the way he killed them, they said, that caused them to die long, painful and allegedly criminally cruel deaths.

"Yes, they are farm animals, but it does matter how they get from a farm to a steak on your plate because the law says it does," Assistant State Attorney Judith Arco said. In this case, according to Arco and fellow prosecutor Jo Wilensky, the law is that goats need to be slaughtered in a way that brings about their death instantly and as painlessly as possible.

Garcia's attorney, Andrew Stine, told jurors that's exactly what happened on two occasions when an investigator with the nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission posed as a customer and secretly recorded the slaughters of two goats.

Stine pointed out that it was Ramirez who actually slaughtered the animals — a point prosecutors countered by saying he was acting on Garcia's orders.

But neither Wilensky nor Arco answered Stine's complaints that the only two witnesses in the trial were the ARM investigator and a veterinarian who volunteers with the group. A legitimate investigation, Stine said, would have law enforcement involved from the start, and he claimed that Garcia only slaughtered the goats because ARM investigator lied and said she wanted to serve the meat at a family party.

"Everyone is special. All animals are special. We're all special, but we all die, and these animals died for a reason," Stine said, adding that the animals' deaths came much quicker than prosecutors claimed.

The four women and two men on the jury deliberated briefly Tuesday before Circuit Judge Samantha Schosberg Feuer sent them home for the day. Before they left, they asked to view again the video that the ARM investigator — who asked reporters not to use her name — recorded of the two slaughters.

On the witness stand, the slaughters were a point of contention between her and Stine, who told her the animals would not have been slaughtered if not for her paying Garcia and "making up all those lies."

"We need to do this, unfortunately, to provide examples of extreme animal cruelty," she responded.

If convicted of the four charges against him, Garcia could face more than 10 years in prison.