

Slaughterhouse boss ends challenge of Florida animal-cruelty law, pleads guilty

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Gregorio Santa Ana, 70, in court Tuesday as he pleaded guilty to operating an illegal slaughterhouse in Northwest Miami-Dade. David Ovalle Miami Herald

Miami-Dade slaughterhouse operator Gregorio Santa Ana won't be challenging Florida's animal-cruelty law after all.

The 70-year-old instead pleaded guilty Tuesday for his role in the illegal animal-slaughter operation in which pigs were starved, beaten, stabbed and even boiled alive — all captured on hidden video by undercover investigators.

Under his plea deal, Santa Ana must serve five years of probation and pay investigators over \$23,000. He is now a felon convicted of animal abuse and can never again work around animals.

Santa Ana's lawyer had recently challenged Florida's animal-cruelty law, saying it was vague and unconstitutional and that it did not prohibit the slaughter of animals destined for the dinner table.

But in the end, Santa chose to not fight the charge.

"Gregorio is soon to be 71 and is in very poor and failing health," said his lawyer, Robert Barrar. "This was nothing more than a plea of convenience because of his extremely poor health."

No slaughter operation, even those overseen by the USDA, is pleasant. But licenses require humane stunning before slaughter and an array of health and handling standards. Miami-Dade prosecutors have targeted several high-profile illegal slaughterhouses in recent years.

The investigation into Santa Ana's "Coco Farm" was spearheaded by the private group Animal Recovery Mission, which targets animal abuse at illegal slaughterhouses and horse farms. The group targeted Santa Ana during Christmas time 2014, when many Hispanic families buy whole pigs to be roasted.

ARM's founder, Richard Couto and undercover investigators began visiting the rural property on the 11800 block of Northwest 41st Street.

Prosecutors said Santa Ana oversaw workers in a slaughterhouse that was nothing more than an "illegal set of filthy shanty shacks and a hodgepodge of ramshackle buildings that were used to illegally mutilate animals for human consumption in conditions that harken to the filth and disease lamented by Upton Sinclair in his influential book, *The Jungle*." Couto called him "the grandfather of the illegal slaughterhouse industry."

"ARM never likes to see an animal cruelty cases end in a plea deal although since Santa Ana never himself killed an animal, we are pleased with the outcome," Couto said Tuesday after the plea deal.