

Slaughter of Loxahatchee goats inhumane, prosecutor argues in farm owner's trial

Marc Freeman Contact Reporter Posted March 29, 2016



The killing of two goats on a Loxahatchee farm last summer — captured on video secretly recorded by an animal rights group — became the focus of a criminal trial Tuesday with the property owner battling four animal cruelty charges.

Using the videos and a veterinarian's findings as key evidence, prosecutors argued Jorge Luis Garcia, 48, owner of Rancho Garcia farm, is responsible for the inhumane — and illegal — slaughtering of the animals.

"He allowed both goats to suffer," Assistant State Attorney Judy Arco said of the animals being strung upside down alive before their throats were sliced with a knife and bled out. "It does matter on how it gets from the farm to your plate."

But while Garcia declined to testify, his lawyer asked for an acquittal on the grounds that the footage fails to prove the goats suffered, and the undercover videos shot on private property violated Garcia's rights.

"It's humane," defense attorney Andrew Stine said during his closing argument in his description of the goat slaughter. "I can't think of anything sharper than a knife. What else was he supposed to use? ... The goat died immediately."

Jorge Garcia, 48, (at right, next to attorney Andrew Stine) is standing trial on four animal cruelty charges connected to the alleged inhumane slaughter of two goats last year on his Rancho Garcia farm in Loxahatchee. (Marc Freeman/Sun Sentinel)

Jurors deliberated for about 15 minutes before being dismissed for the day at 6 p.m. The panel of four women and two men will resume deliberations at 9 a.m. Wednesday.

The jury also already asked to view the videos again.

Garcia, whose farm, along with two others, was raided by authorities, was targeted by the Miami-based Animal Recovery Mission. Representatives of the organization took the secret videos — of people posing as consumers seeking to buy meat from fresh kills — prompting law enforcement officers to raid three farms Oct. 13.

Palm Beach Circuit Judge Samantha Schosberg Feuer on Tuesday again denied a motion by Stine to prevent the jury from seeing the graphic, full-color videos. Audio from the full-color videos was not played for the jurors.

One of the group's undercover investigators testified about visiting Garcia's farm on Aug. 22 and Sept. 12, concealing tiny cameras and asking to buy goat meat for family gatherings.

"This is the only way we can provide evidence" of extreme animal cruelty, the Animal Recovery Mission employee told the jury. The witness asked reporters to withhold an identification because of the nature of the work.

On cross-examination, the witness admitted lying to Garcia and seeing a sign with the words, "Enter at your own risk."

The investigator said that on the first visit a brown and white full-size goat appeared to suffer after being hung upside down and having its throat slashed with a knife.

"It sounded like the cry of a little baby," the witness testified.

Prosecutors showed the videos to the jury after their lunch break.

Heidi Thomas, an Ocala veterinarian and volunteer for Animal Recovery Mission, testified the goats suffered unnecessary pain and stress, starting with being tied upside down and then drowning in their own blood after their necks were cut open.

"It's not a natural position for a goat to have its legs hyperextended like that," Thomas said.

The defense, however, challenged Thomas for only having watched the videos and not examining the animals after they were killed.

Before the trial, Garcia turned down an offer from prosecutors to plead guilty in exchange for a sentence of five years' probation, including six months in jail. Now he faces up to 10 years and four months in prison if convicted as charged.

Four of the eight men arrested last fall after the three farm raids have taken plea deals, including one of Garcia's co-defendants Monday.

Jose Guadalupe Pena, 36, pleaded guilty to one count of animal cruelty and one count of killing animals by non-humane methods. He was sentenced to one day in jail and given credit for serving that time.

A case is still pending against another Garcia co-defendant, Rafael Ramirez, 50, described as "the butcher" by Stine. His next court date is May 17. Ramirez faces the same charges as Garcia, along with one count of unlawful possession or sale of horse meat.

Animal Recovery Mission members reported finding filets of cut-up horse meat at Rancho Garcia, 15703 Orange Blvd.

Prosecutors say they found no evidence of horses being slaughtered on the farm. But the activist group accused Garcia of "brutally torturing" animals and supplying horse meat "to customers from Miami to Palm Beach."

Animal Recovery Mission founder Richard "Kudo" Cuoto, who attended the trial, said his group "is hopeful that the jury will find Jorge Garcia guilty for all his crimes and the judge hand down the maximum penalties."

In his opening statement, Stine blasted Animal Recovery Mission for coming onto private property and filming in violation of his client's rights.

"Who is the prosecutor?" he asked rhetorically. "Because I'm really confused here." According to court records, Cuoto told a Palm Beach County Sheriff's detective that Rancho Garcia was open to the public, and advertised goats and pigs for sale.

But Stine asked the jury to question why the prosecutors did not call any law enforcement officers to testify at the trial in support of the two counts of felony animal cruelty and two counts of killing animals by non-humane methods.

Stine also urged the jury not to be biased against people who prefer to buy meat directly from a local slaughter farm instead of grocery stores.

"The animal has to die for us to put it on the plate," Stine said. "It's not unjustifiable pain because you have to kill them to eat them...it's healthy livestock that was killed...at the behest of ARM."

But Assistant State Attorney Jo Wilensky said the goats clearly "suffered at the hands of the defendant. He ordered his butcher to do the slaughter."

She also rejected the defense argument that the undercover investigation was improper. "Otherwise the cover gets blown and we don't get this evidence," Wilensky said. "ARM is trying to stop the cruel suffering of animals."