

Sheriff: Group should have provided video of alleged abuse at dairy farm sooner

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A worker at Larson Dairy in Okeechobee County is shown here kicking a cow in the head. Provided.

The undercover animal cruelty investigative group that recorded the alleged abuse at Larson Dairy should have given the video to the sheriff's office sooner instead of continuing to record at the farm for three weeks, Okeechobee County Sheriff Noel Stephen said Monday.

A surveillance video released Thursday by Animal Recovery Mission of Miami Beach shot at Larson Dairy shows workers kicking cows in the head and torso, punching their udders and beating them with a steel rod inside the barn and milking stalls.

Stephen said he watched the video following a press conference he held Thursday at 3:15 p.m. Earlier that same day, at 11:30 a.m., Stephen received a Fed Ex envelope that included still photos and the video that showed three individuals kicking and hitting cows, sometimes with a weapon, at Larson Dairy.

Warning: Video contains graphic images



Operation Larson Dairy Farm from ARM Investigations on Vimeo.

“I really wish the individuals who recorded the video would have given the video to OCSO at the time, because the abuse probably continued, unnecessarily, up until that time. It was unfortunately publicized before it was ever reported,” Stephen said in a statement.

“According to what has been reported, the Animal Recovery Mission had three weeks of undercover investigating they conducted. Had this alleged abuse been brought to our attention, my deputies and detectives could have resolved this issue then,” Stephen said.

Richard “Kudo” Couto, ARM’s founder and lead investigator said Monday the sheriff, an elected official, is trying to shift blame.

Couto said the undercover investigator, who obtained employment at the dairy in August, continued to record the activities in the barn while trying unsuccessfully to gain access to other areas, such as the birthing and downer cow areas. A downer cow is one who can no longer stand on its own and is usually killed.

“We had a lot of leads coming in to us from employees at Larson and from contractors who do business with Larson who said there was comparable cruelty in other areas of the property, other than the milking barn,” Couto said Monday.

“This company has about nine monster locations,” Couto said. “As undercover investigators we would not have been doing our job unless we looked into other locations.”

On Monday, Stephen reiterated what he said last week — he has known the Larson family for years, and they would not condone such behavior.

“I was in contact with two of the farm’s owners, Woody and Jacob Larson. The Larsons welcomed the investigation. Had they known about it (alleged abuse), they would have fired them on the spot. One of the employees in the pictures was fired and two more were suspended pending an investigation by the dairy farm. In my thirty years working at the Sheriff’s Office we have never received any innuendos, complaints or allegations in regards to the Larsons themselves. The dairy operations will continue because these cattle have to be milked twice a day or they will get sick,” Stephen said.

Nigel Cook, a University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor in Food Animal Production Medicine and department chair in the School of Veterinary Medicine, was sent a link to the video by the Palm Beach Post.

“The behavior it shows is indefensible and cannot be tolerated on our farms,” Cook said. “Milkers brandishing rebar, hitting poking and stabbing cows and punching udders is shocking and not typical of the dairy industry as a whole – I wouldn’t work in such an industry.”

Cook said an animal stressed in this manner would not let her milk down in the parlor and the farm would go out of business.

“The fact that the owner states that he did not know what is going on is also unacceptable. Workers on Dairy Farm audited herds are required to be trained in animal handling by management and sign a form to guarantee their gentle treatment of animals on the farm. Poor supervision and training of workers is not

acceptable at any level and it is clear that these milkers did not know what they were doing and their poor handling skills made things far worse,” Cook said.

Cook added, “I am concerned that with fewer and fewer milkers available to milk the cows in the U.S. dairy industry because of the current immigration climate we may see more poorly qualified individuals working on our farms and an increase in these types of incidents.”