



Arrest made in Florida dairy cow abuse case; three others sought

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One man was arrested and three others are being sought in the abuse of cows at a Florida dairy captured on undercover video.

Arrested was Helias Cruz, 49, charged with misdemeanor animal cruelty for kicking a cow, according a news release Friday from the Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office. Warrants are out for three others on charges of felony animal cruelty for a variety of acts allegedly committed against cows at Larson Dairy Farm.

Omar Jimenes Mendosa, 36, was charged with two counts animal cruelty for hitting an animal with rebar, and Omar Guadalupe Mendosa, 29, was charged with eight counts of animal cruelty for stabbing and hitting cows with rebar, pulling a cow's leg and punching and kicking the animals. A third employee, not being named because he is 17, was charged with four counts of animal cruelty for hitting a cow with rebar, bending a cow's tail, kicking cows and hitting one in the udder.

The charges follow the release last week of video taken by an undercover worker for Animal Recovery Mission, a Miami-Dade County organization that infiltrates businesses suspected of abusing animals.

The video shows cows being kicked, punched and struck with metal bars, as workers hustled to get them in and out of milking stalls. One cow, stuck in one of the narrow stalls, moved its head wildly to avoid the blows. Workers were shown kicking and punching cows. Calves, taken from their mothers at birth, were shown penned in narrow outdoor cages, one with deformed legs unable to stand up.

Publix, which had been a major customer of the dairy, suspended deliveries the day the video was released.

The sheriff's office said its detectives worked with Jacob Larson, the dairy farm's owner, to identify the employees shown in the videos. He fired two employees and suspended two others, according to the release.

The sheriff's office blamed Animal Recovery Mission for the failure to arrest the three former workers still at large, saying the group should have reported the abuse immediately and has failed to cooperate with the investigation.

"The delay in reporting and lack of cooperation is significantly hindering this investigation and has already allowed responsible individuals to avoid prosecution," Sheriff Noel Stephen said in a news release. "It is my hope that this will change moving forward."

Richard Couto, founder and lead investigator for Animal Recovery Mission, said he and his undercover have been cooperating, but with the Okeechobee State Attorney's Office, not the sheriff's office. They will meet with prosecutors again next week.

He said he did not trust the sheriff. At a news conference last week, the sheriff announced a criminal investigation into the treatment of cows at Larson and added that he knew the Larson family well and was certain they would not have condoned the abuse by their employees.

"We have fear and safety issues," Couto said. "The sheriff is very good friends with Jacob Larson and the whole Larson family. Do you really think that I personally am going to bring our investigator into Okeechobee County and walk him into the police station?"

Couto has also said that evidence is never turned over as soon as the videos are made because it can take months to gather the evidence that animal cruelty is systematic at a particular business.

The animal-rights group this week released video taken at a second dairy in Okeechobee County, showing workers whipping and punching cows at Burnham Dairy.

The Sheriff's Office has not launched a criminal investigation in this case because the animal rights group did not submit any evidence or file a complaint. But Couto said evidence from that case will be brought directly to prosecutors.