

Ritual sacrifices, slaughter by stabbing, horse meat sales and more alleged at four Fort Myers area farms

[Amy Bennett Williams](#), AWILLIAMS@NEWS-PRESS.COM Published 6:42 p.m. ET April 12, 2018 | Updated 11:38 a.m. ET April 13, 2018

ARM set out to investigate the Rancho Las Delicias and Rancho Santa Barbara farms, in 2015. Investigation of a third farm, Rancho Antony & Roman, began in March 2017, and a fourth farm, Rancho Cabrera, in December 2017. Andrea Melendez/news-press.com



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(Photo: Andrea Melendez/The News-Press)

At an emotional news conference Thursday, the head of an animal welfare nonprofit detailed his group's multiyear undercover investigation into four Fort Myers area farms he accuses of gross cruelty, illegal horse meat sales and more.

Rancho Las Delicias, Rancho Santa Barbara, Rancho Antony & Roman and Rancho Cabrera are all clustered in rural Buckingham off Eastwood Acres Road, places with weed-choked pastures, scattered outbuildings and slumping fences.

What Richard Couto, of the [Miami Beach-based Animal Recovery Mission](#), said happens at these farms is horrific: animals starved, drinking their slaughtered barn-mates' blood, skinned alive or ritually sacrificed. Yet because Couto and his nonprofit gathered their evidence illegally, according to the Lee County sheriff and state attorney's offices, it can't be used in a prosecution.

"It's tainted," said Sgt. Randy Hodges, with the Lee County Sheriff's Office Agricultural Unit. "It's what we would call the fruits of the poisonous tree."

This isn't the first time Couto has encountered this. Although his nonprofit's undercover investigations have yielded a number of convictions in the past, in 2016 a Miami judge ruled a secretly recorded video was illegal and couldn't be used to make a case against a Miami-Dade slaughterhouse.

In 2015, Couto began getting reports of illegal slaughterhouses in Buckingham. He visited Rancho Santa Barbara to buy a pig, he said, and saw a host of violations: environmental hazards, animal cruelty, illegal butchering and sale of uninspected meat.

"I looked across the street, I saw another sign: Rancho (las) Delicias." He went in and found worse conditions, he said. "Aggression training dogs for illegal fighting ... killing horses for the illegal meat trade in Lee County ... butchering all types of animals, everything from pigs, goats to chickens to cows for human consumption."



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Richard Couto, the founder, chief executive director and lead investigator of The Animal Recovery Mission, talks to the media during a news conference Thursday morning about their work they have been doing after receiving resident complaints of illegal animal and horse slaughter in Lee County that began in 2015, according to Couto. ARM set out to investigate the Rancho Las Delicias and Rancho Santa Barbara farms in 2015. Investigation of a third farm, Rancho Antony & Roman, began in March 2017, and a fourth farm, Rancho Cabrera, in December 2017. Following ARM's undercover investigation alleging extreme acts of animal cruelty, reports were given to the Lee County Sheriff's Office and Lee County State Attorney's Office. ARM is upset that the state has found no animal cruelty. (Photo: Andrea Melendez/The News-Press)

Couto and his team began investigating, posing as buyers and befriending staff at the ranches, while secretly videotaping their interactions.

When Couto met with Lee County sheriff's deputies to tell them what he'd found and show the video he'd collected, he was disappointed by their response. "Your agriculture crimes unit could care less," he said. The state attorney's office wasn't interested either, Couto said, determining "no crime was committed, no animal cruelty. These animals did not suffer."



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A ranch hand at Rancho Antony & Roman, Carlos Cubria, tends to the animals Thursday afternoon. (Photo: Andrea Melendez/The News-Press)

Especially frustrating to Couto is that law enforcement in Miami-Dade has cracked down on some 100 similar operations that “have been raided, animals rescued, violators prosecuted and in many instances, the entire properties bulldozed down to the ground to make sure they’re not reopened,” he said. “Have we seen that in Lee County? Of course not ... these violators are moving to Lee County because of lack of enforcement. I know this because I’m the person who’s been undercover here for three long years.”

In Lee County, Couto said, law enforcement is “focusing on the crimes being committed by ARM, an organization that has come in and given a service to the community of Lee County.” Indeed, both the sheriff’s and state attorney’s office say they’ve warned Couto’s group that such surreptitious recordings are a third-degree felony, as is disseminating them.



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ARM set out to investigate the Rancho Las Delicias. It is accused of being very cruel to animals and selling horse meat. When the News-Press visited the farm Thursday there were a few chickens, one young hog and a few goats. The sign had been removed, and workers said they were closed. A few workers were cleaning the grounds. (Photo: Andrea Melendez/The News-Press)

Hodges said he sympathizes with the desire to help, “and we’re all for that, (but) don’t go in and do things that are illegal then expect us to go on and try to fix them, because we can’t ... pursue something that was illegally obtained.”

Except it wasn't illegally obtained, argues ARM's lawyer Jason Pizzo, former Miami-Dade assistant state attorney; in a place that's open to the public, as the ranches were, there's no expectation of privacy. Plus, "Just because a video of a criminal act gets out or is released does not make it any less criminal," Pizzo said. "The dissemination of video to the public or the media doesn't make it any less of a crime. There's some sort of a legal

disconnect between what has been tried and proven in Miami-Dade and Palm Beach County (and in) Lee County."

The Buckingham farms operated by buying stolen animals from other parts of the state to be butchered in Lee County, Couto said, "to fuel the horse meat trade. To fuel dog fighting. To fuel black magic — voodoo, Santeria, palo mayombe — not just chickens and goats are being sacrificed for these religions (but) dogs and horses too ... operating openly now, as I speak ... butchering animals alive, they are skinning them alive. They are drowning them in boiling water, They are fighting them."

Yet on Thursday afternoon, few animals were in evidence around the Eastwood Acres neighborhood where the ranches are located.

A sign in front of the Santa Barbara Ranch declares it closed.

Las Delicias' road sign is down, and manager Aymee Diaz said the place had been closed for weeks. A quick tour of the ramshackle facility showed dark, empty refrigerators, vacant stalls and dirt-floored pens heaped with garbage, but no animals. In front, a few goats grazed as chickens scratched through the dirt.

At his farm, Roman Hernandez, who owns Rancho Anthony & Roman said he does no butchering and sells no meat.

"Live animals only," he said in Spanish. "If you come here and tell me you want to buy a goat, then sure, I'll sell it to you. That's what I do. It's how I earn my living."

LCSO investigates every animal cruelty case by the books.
Andrea Melendez/news-press.com

