

LEE COUNTY

Animal rights supporters want arrests at Lee County farms

REPORTER: LAREN SWEENEY Published: May 3, 2018 9:16 PM EDT



The Animal Recovery Mission held a townhall style meeting at Lakes Regional Library Thursday to discuss allegations of animal abuse that were presented to the Lee County Sheriff's Office and State Attorney.



WINK News / Community members gather to view the undercover security footage.

"We are experts on animal abuse," said Richard Cuoto, the leader of the Miami-based organization that launches undercover investigations into animal cruelty.

A few dozen members of the public showed up to listen to details of ARM's undercover operations into four farms in Lee County, which began in 2015.

Cuoto showed a video of a cow being shot in the head, and then slaughtered. It caused members of the crowd to leave the room in tears.

The video was one piece of evidence Cuoto said the group presented to the Lee County Sheriff's Office and State Attorney's office where prosecution was declined.

Animal rights supporters have been protesting near the farms and calling for action since ARM [first released its allegations last month](#).

Prosecutor notes from a 2016 review of an animal abuse investigation conducted by ARM show that a clip of a pig being slaughtered was reviewed and determined that no animal abuse had occurred.

Other undercover videos shot by ARM between 2016 and late 2017 depict goats having their throats slit, dogs aggressively biting at each other, and apparent horse meat sales.

He said his investigators bought horse meat at one of the farms and they later sent samples to a lab to confirm it was in fact horse meat.

Selling and buying horse meat for human consumption in Florida is a felony, according to an attorney for ARM.

Cuoto said all of the undercover videos and evidence were presented to Lee County authorities.

The State Attorney's Office said it felt the videos that ARM provided were recorded illegally and declined the cases due to potential issues with that evidence.

Emails from the Lee County Sheriff's office show in 2017, detectives asked ARM to help them with an undercover horse meat buy. However, the email claims that one of the ARM investigators was uncomfortable about potential retaliation so detectives called it off.

ARM had a different version of those events: stating that members of the Sheriff's office had incorrectly explained how protections for confidential informants should work, which made their investigator nervous.

Cuoto described being irate when the sheriff's office called off the investigation.

"They said, you are no longer qualified. You no longer fit our criteria to go buy undercover horse meat," he told the crowd.

Christopher Crowley, a former prosecutor who is running for State Attorney, said he invited ARM to present the evidence that had been given to authorities. Prior to the event, he said based on what he had seen on ARM's website there were charges that could be pursued.

Amira Fox, the chief assistant State Attorney, was not available for an interview but issued the following statement:

"The State Attorney's Office always stand ready to review any charges recommended by law enforcement and it is improper and unfortunate that my opponent would try to use potentially serious legal matters as another campaign stunt."

One arrest was made at one of the farms accused in ARM's investigation, but it was for something unrelated to anything captured on undercover video.

Unlicensed slaughter is regulated by the USDA. The agency confirmed it was looking into the farms last month.