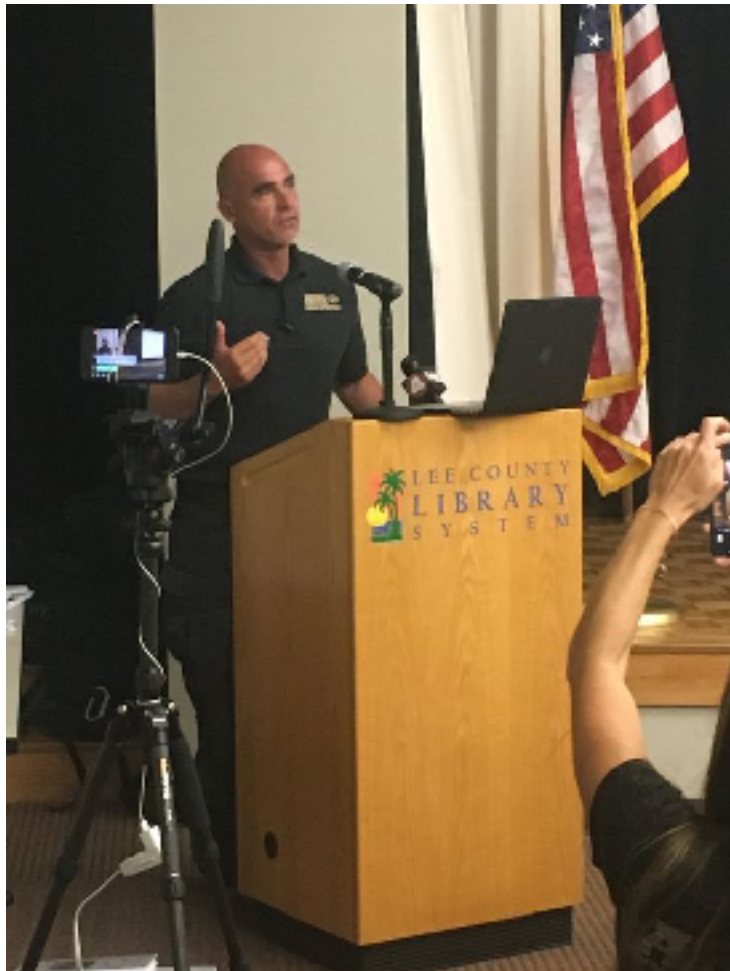


Animal rights group makes its case — again — as state attorney hopeful looks on

Brent Batten, brent.batten@naplesnews.com; 239-263-4776

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(Photo: Brent Batten)

In a mix of passion, protest and politics, about 70 animal rights activists gathered in Lee County on Thursday to hear representatives of Miami-based Animal Recovery Mission accuse Lee County deputies and prosecutors of dragging their feet in a probe of slaughterhouses.

It's the second time in less than a month that Richard Couto, founder of ARM, has made a public presentation of information gathered by his group over the past 2½ years.

Thursday's presentation was organized by Christopher Crowley, a former prosecutor now running to replace State Attorney Steve Russell in the post.

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More: [Collier man charged with more than 130 counts of animal cruelty](#)

Amira Fox, Russell's chief assistant, is also running for the job.

"I never heard of them until two weeks ago," Crowley said of ARM.

But part of his platform is trying to make the case that Russell's administration — and by extension Fox — is reluctant to take on difficult cases, and he uses the ARM case as an example.



Jacqueline Woish of Sarasota stands with some 200 animal rights protestors along Buckingham Road in Lehigh Acres on Sunday as part of an organized protest against what they said were alleged illegal slaughterhouse operations in the area. (Photo: Michael Braun/The News-Press)

Couto said he doesn't have a political agenda and just wants operations investigated and shut down.

In his initial reports posted online, Couto named two other assistant prosecutors as his contacts in the case. By Thursday, Fox's name was prominently included in the criticism.

Audience members at Lakes Regional Library said they planned to protest at Fox's upcoming campaign events, and others have been protesting near the slaughterhouse sites, discouraging people from going in.

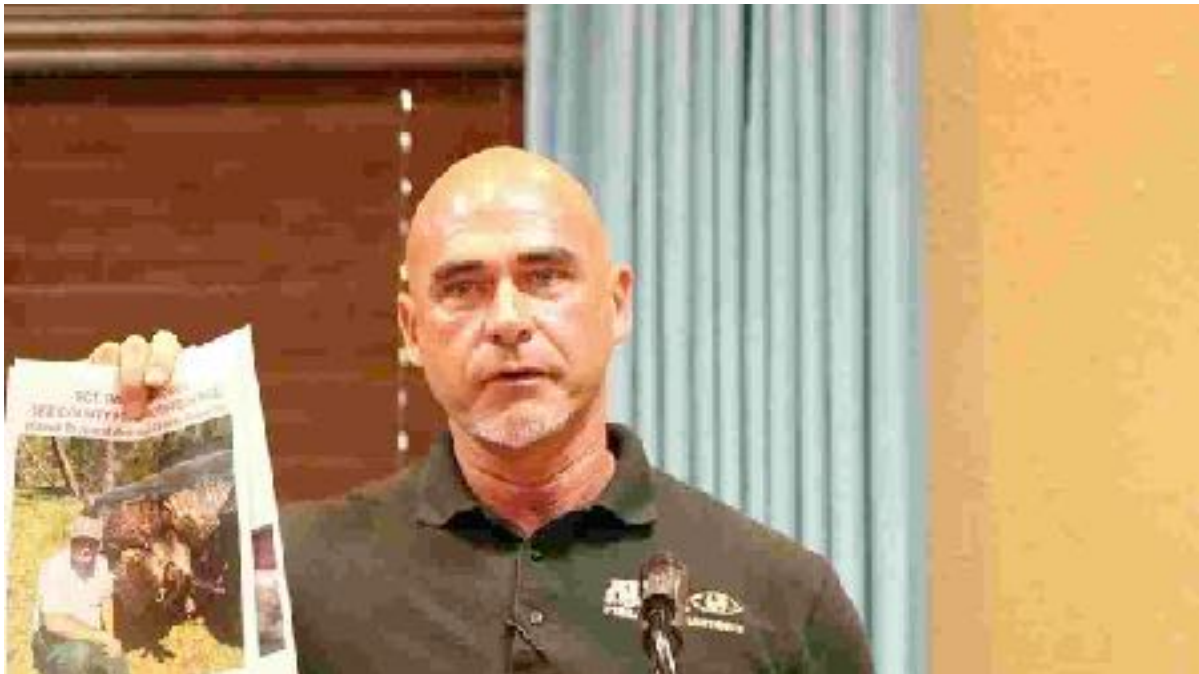
"Understand how important it is for people to protest," Couto said. "You're turning away mounds of traffic. You're saving 100 animals a day."

Sheriff's investigators and the State Attorney's Office have several concerns over the information brought to them by ARM.

Chief among them is that the videos may not have been legally obtained. Couto, a former investigator with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, dismissed that and other concerns in his presentation that lasted more than two hours and included graphic video of a cow being butchered while apparently still alive.

"I am an expert and I see animal cruelty in this video. You don't have to be an expert," he said.

The slaughterhouses were open to the public when the video was shot, he said.



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](https://www.news-press.com)

“There’s no expectation of privacy in a public place,” said Jason Pizzo, a former prosecutor in Dade County who now works with ARM.

Other sheriffs and prosecutors, including those in Dade and Palm Beach counties, have used video obtained by ARM to launch successful prosecutions against similar operations.

Those may have led to what’s happening in Lee County, Pizzo said. “A number of these bad actors came from Miami-Dade County. They got kicked out,” Pizzo said.

In one of ARM’s high-profile cases, six Palm Beach County men were arrested and more than 750 animals were taken from four slaughterhouses there in 2016. ARM video was instrumental in making that case, media reports indicate.

On the other hand, 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.

Pizzo said the rules should be applied evenly across the state. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, Russell’s office Wednesday announced 131 counts relating to animal cruelty in an unrelated case against a Collier County man.

Robert Starkweather, 51, is accused of starving cows, calves and donkeys at a site near LaBelle and improperly disposing of the carcasses of those that died.



Animal rights protest in east Lee County. Video by Michael Braun

Starkweather was arrested March 23, and a file in Hendry County Circuit Court was opened on April 6. Starkweather pleaded not guilty on April 27. Samantha Syoen, spokeswoman for Russell's office, said the announcement was made Wednesday because prosecutors only formally signed off on the charges Tuesday, May 1, a fact reflected in the court file. "I don't know how they handle their system nor how (the Hendry County Sheriff's Office) inputs cases. I assure you that (earlier court information) is not a filing of charges," she said.

Crowley campaign workers were at Thursday's event handing out "Get Tough on Crime" handbills.

He had the difficult job of trying keep a distance between himself and ARM while still getting across his point.

"I have noticed a pattern of the State Attorney's Office shying away from tough cases," he said. "I don't want anybody to say I'm organizing protest against my opponent."