

UPDATE: USDA to Review Claims of Illegal Slaughterhouses Operating in Florida

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The USDA's statement was released less than a week after Animal Recovery Mission (ARM) held a news conference detailing its investigation and alleged lack of police involvement.

UPDATE (April 19) — The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced it will review the allegations of possible illegal slaughterhouses operating in Lee County, Florida, according to a statement.

The agency did not provide a timeline for the review, but said its “Food Safety and Inspection Service takes humane handling seriously. The

agency is currently reviewing alleged welfare issues concerning livestock and poultry in Lee County and will determine the appropriate next steps.”

The USDA’s statement was released less than a week after Animal Recovery Mission (ARM) held a news conference detailing its investigation and alleged lack of police involvement.

In addition to the USDA’s statement, on Monday, the Lee County Sheriff’s Department arrested Osmany Toledo Suarez after an injured hog was reportedly found at a Buckingham farm with no source of clean water. Suarez, who works at one of the four farms ARM has accused of running illegal slaughterhouses, was charged with one count of animal cruelty.

In response to the arrest, ARM issued a statement: “Whilst an arrest is good news...ARM is still asking for the 30 plus animal cruelty charges upon Suarez alone, as well as the remaining animal killers and abusers that were documented throughout ARM’s three year undercover investigation.”

Animal Recovery Mission (ARM), an investigative animal welfare organization based in Florida, has uncovered illegal slaughter farms in Lee County, Florida — calling their findings the worst animal abuse to ever occur in the area. Yet, Florida authorities have not made any arrests or formally shut down the farms in question.

ARM began its investigation in June 2015 when the group received citizen complaints about a farm that was slaughtering horses in the Lee County area. Over the following 2½ years, ARM investigators conducted undercover research — reportedly including purchasing animals that were otherwise intended for slaughter — at four farms. The group’s **findings** have included the butchering of horses and sale of their meat; stabbing, drowning, dragging, and butchering of farm animals while still conscious; canine aggression training; trade of farm and domestic animals for ritualistic ceremonies; and injured and ill animals living in unsanitary conditions.

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According to its published **timeline**, ARM representatives first met with the Lee County Sheriff's Office in March 2016. The timeline indicates several correspondences with the sheriff office, including requests for police investigations. On April 12, 2018, citing that its evidence "has been met with repeated resistance and reluctance of enforcing arrests and shutdowns," ARM issued a press release and held a corresponding **news conference** detailing its investigation.

"Due to lack of enforcement in Lee County there are not two slaughterhouses running openly to the public, but four," Richard Cuoto, founder and lead investigator for ARM, told the media.

In email correspondence between ARM and the Lee County Sheriff's Office (also published on the ARM website), county representatives informed ARM that "no matter how egregious or disturbing the potential crime, the unlawful interception of oral communications cannot be used as evidence."

Following the news conference, ARM received press coverage from local news sources, including a **USA Today** affiliate that visited some of the farms named in the investigation. According to the report, two of the farms were apparently closed and the owner at a third location insisted he only sold live animals.

In 2010, ARM was credited with helping to expose 18 cases of horses being illegally slaughtered for their meat for human consumption in Miami-Dade County. As a result, ARM was influential in creating the Good Horse Slaughter Act, which made it a felony in Florida to buy, sell, transport, kill a horse or possess horse meat for human consumption.