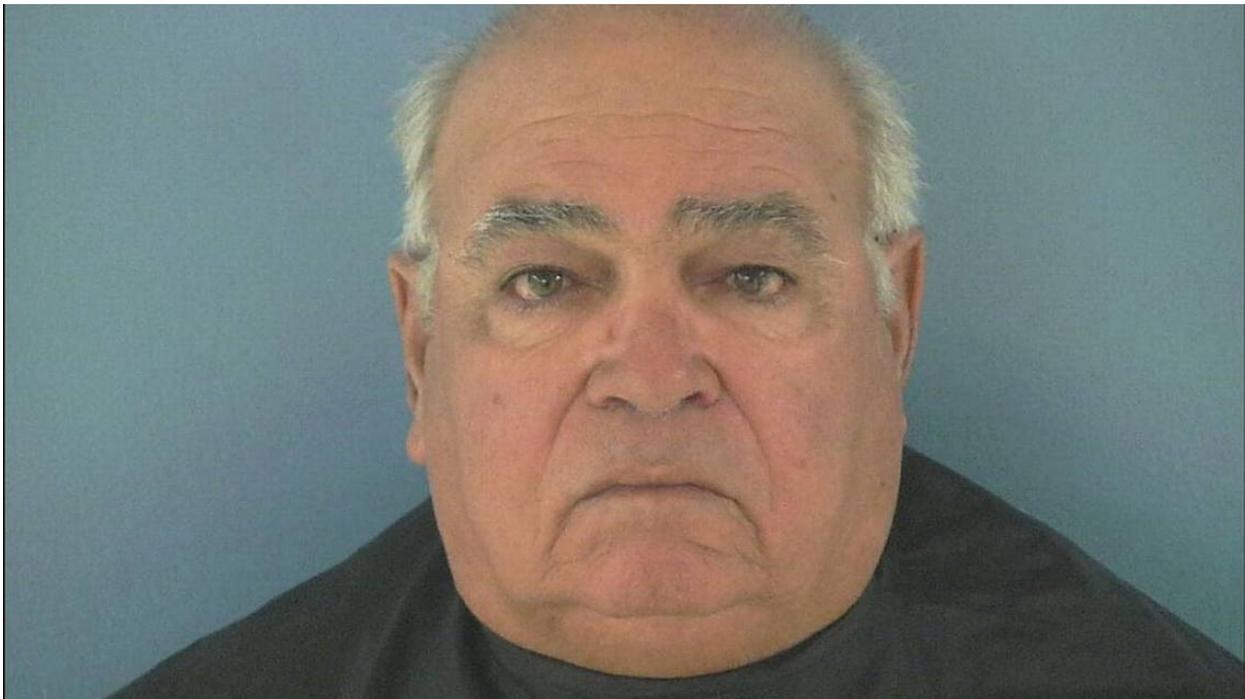


'This is a bad dude.' Miami man once jailed for selling horse meat is in trouble again

BY DAVID OVALLE

MAY 29, 2020 12:23 PM , UPDATED JUNE 03, 2020 09:01 AM



Four years ago, an elderly Miami ranch owner named Manuel Coto-Martinez was charged after he illegally sold horse meat to an undercover police detective. He wound up serving one day in jail, three months of probation and was not allowed to have horses for that time.

Coto-Martinez, authorities say, is off probation and in trouble again — this time after 23 malnourished and

neglected horses were found on his ranch in Okeechobee County.

Prosecutors in Okeechobee County this week charged the 74-year-old on 10 counts of animal cruelty, one of them a felony, the rest misdemeanors. He has pleaded not guilty.

Deputies raided his ranch in April, and arrested him early last month. The horses were [seized and are now living at a ranch](#) ran by Horses without Humans Rescue in Bell. Coto-Martinez has been a longtime nemesis for a South Florida group called Animal Recovery Mission, which targets illegal slaughterhouses, cockfighting rings and ranches where animals are being maltreated. ARM was not involved directly in the Okeechobee case, but said it will work with prosecutors to ensure Coto-Martinez gets punished.

“This is a bad dude,” the group’s founder, Richard Couto, said on Friday. “He’s been shut down at least four or five times, and he re-opens after they leave. He just doesn’t care about law enforcement because he knows his operations are still lucrative and he’s just going to get to get a slap on the wrist.”

ARM continues to send undercover operatives to investigate Coto-Martinez, he said.

Last year, ARM had approached Miami-Dade police and prosecutors about allegations that Coto-Martinez was

[illegally slaughtering pigs](#) on one of his properties. The Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office, at the time, said it could not find any evidence of criminal wrongdoing in how the pigs were being treated.

Some law-enforcement agencies, including the Miami-Dade State Attorney's, have ripped the group's tactics. In 2018, prosecutor Michael Filteau cited "serious ethical concerns" about [ARM's tactics in a cockfighting case](#),



According to police, a confidential informant introduced Manuel Coto-Martinez to an undercover Miami-Dade detective posing as buyer of horse meat.

which included Couto refusing to work with cops, potentially tampering with evidence and even dragging cockfight attendees out of bushes by force.

As for Coto-Martinez, he was first arrested locally in 2016 in case investigated by Miami-Dade police.

According to police, a confidential informant introduced Coto-Martinez to an undercover Miami-Dade detective, who posed as a buyer of horse meat. He and another detective, posed as husband and wife, pretending they had a child suffering from anemia. The reason: in some cultures, iron-rich horse meat is believed to help symptoms of the illness.

An informant and the undercover detectives bought dozens of pounds of frozen horse meat at Coto-Martinez's rural Miami-Dade ranch in the rural C-9 basin, a sparsely developed agricultural area west of Hialeah and the Florida Turnpike Extension.

At the time, the case was believed to be the first time in South Florida that investigators documented the actual sale of horse meat in the highly secretive black market. In recent years, the carcasses of butchered horses, their meat likely bound for dinner tables, have been found across South Florida, particularly in rural swaths of western Miami-Dade County.