

FAIR OAKS FOOTAGE VIRAL AGAIN

WATCH NOW: Undercover videos showing abuse at Fair Oaks Farms goes viral two years later

Anna Ortiz
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Fair Oaks Farm, an agritourism destination, is located in Fair Oaks, off Interstate 65 in Newton County.

Emily Schnipke, file, The Times

Anna Ortiz

OPERATION FAIR OAK

WARNING: Graphic material shown.

An undercover video provided by Animal Recovery Mission shows workers allegedly abusing animals at Fair Oaks Farms in Newton County.

Provided by Animal Recovery Mission

FAIR OAKS — Videos of calves being body slammed and kicked at Fair Oaks Farms posted two years ago by activist group Animal Mission Recovery has had a recent viral resurface on social media.

"I learned about it yesterday," said Richard Couto, Animal Recovery Mission founder.

"We've been trying to figure out where this regeneration of the videos has come from. It didn't come from us."

On June 4, 2019, videos depicting employees abusing calves were released by **ARM** following an undercover investigation by the animal rights group. Members worked as employees while wearing a hidden camera. The videos showed calves being kicked in the head and being struck with branding irons and iron rods, and dead calves were shown piled in the dirt.

The controversy led to businesses dropping Fairlife products, including Stack & Van Til, Jewel-Osco and Tony's Fresh Market.

Couto said the videos have now been going viral across all social media platforms, including newer sites like TikTok. He said sometimes videos from former investigations will resurface years later but the scope of this reemergence is fairly significant. Individuals across the country have been recently resharing the videos, calling for a boycott on Fair Oaks Farms and Fairlife products.

"This is rare," Couto said. "The response is similar to when we first published the footage on a smaller scale, with the outrage in general. We have been flooded with emails to ask if we are still undercover with the dairy industry and asking about Fair Oaks Farms. ... It is heartwarming as investigators to see reemerging interest. We didn't spur it on but we are glad it happened. Now millions more are becoming aware of these issues."

Fair Oaks Farms representatives did not immediately respond to The Times inquiries Friday afternoon. In a public statement in 2019, Fair Oaks Farms Chairman Mike McCloskey acknowledged that four of the people shown committing alleged abuses were Fair Oaks Farms employees, and one person was a third-party truck driver who was transporting calves. The employees were fired and faced charges of animal abuse.

The Newton County prosecutor's office charged three men accused of abusing young calves at Fair Oaks Farms: Santiago Ruvalcaba Contreros, 31; Edgar Gardozo Vazquez, 36; and Miguel Angel Navarro Serrano, 38.

Gardozo Vasquez pleaded guilty late last year to misdemeanor animal cruelty and was sentenced to a term of probation under a plea agreement in which the prosecutor dropped a felony count of torturing or mutilating a vertebrate animal.

No court records were available on the remaining defendants.

"I am committed to never again have to watch a video of our animals suffering the way that they suffered," McCloskey said June 6, 2019, in a video posted to **Fair Oaks Farms' Facebook page**. "I guarantee you that this will never happen again at Fair Oaks Farms."

McCloskey has since announced changes in operations, including having an animal welfare expert on staff, installing cameras to monitor employees in contact with animals and having frequent, third-party audits performed on the farm.

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The undercover videos and ARM's animal abuse report on Fair Oaks Farms since had a **snowball effect** on the company. In addition to individuals and companies boycotting the business and its products, in June 2019 delivery services were temporarily suspended. Fair Oaks Farms said that people were harassing the business and its staff via phone calls, messages, social media and in person during deliveries.

In November 2019, The Times reported that at least eight federal **lawsuits** had been filed against Fairlife from across the country, including California, Florida and Indiana. The Coca-Cola Company and Fair Oaks owners Mike and Sue McCloskey are named as co-defendants in the suits, which were being consolidated into a single fraud case.

Fairlife has advertised itself as being high-nutrition, ethically sourced milk, with labels stating that exceptional care was taken "every step of the way," from milking the cows to bottling the final product.

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit allege that these qualities justified premium prices for the product, which they said they bought the products solely because of the guarantee for "extraordinary animal care."

"Defendants preyed on consumer desire for dairy products sourced from farms that ensure high levels of animal welfare by making animal welfare claims a central tenet of their labeling campaign," one of the lawsuits alleges. "But Fairlife's and its founders' 'promise' is a sham. Their cows do not receive 'extraordinary care and comfort.' As a matter of routine and practice, Fairlife's cows are tortured, kicked, stomped on, body slammed, stabbed with steel rebar, thrown off the side of trucks, dragged through the dirt by their ears and left to die unattended in over 100-degree heat. ... To add insult to injury, the abuse is rampant even at Fairlife's 'flagship farm in Indiana' that customers are urged to visit on the products' labels."

The above suit has been transferred to the U.S. Northern District of Illinois courts and the case is ongoing. According to online federal court records, the next hearing will be a remote status hearing on July 15.

Couto said he believes that there is a growing trend of people turning away from dairy and seeking out alternatives like soy milk due to videos like the ones ARM posted about Fair Oaks Farm. He said some people have recently reached out to him asking if they can feel better about purchasing products from the company since the announcement from McCloskey about changes instated for animal welfare. Cuoto said, "The answer is no for me."

"Going undercover in the dairy industry, we always find the same crimes committed against the animals," he said. "I think people are starting to understand that and diving into the dairy issue for their own physical health, animal abuse and environmental impact. People are starting to do their own homework on this."

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Aaron Williams