

POST-TRIBUNE

Jasper County dairy farm under fire for abuse allegations, denies affiliation with Fair Oaks Farms

By Amy Lavalley

Post-Tribune

Published: Sep 15, 2023 at 5:01 pm



Fair Oaks Farms in Newton County. (Staff)

An animal rights organization released a video this week depicting horrific abuse of dairy cows and calves taken at a Jasper County farm it claims is affiliated with Fair Oaks Farms, and while the owner of the farm admitted to the abuses and said he is working to rectify them, both he and Fair Oaks deny he is connected with the agribusiness tourist attraction.

The graphic, three-minute video, which is available on YouTube, shows farmworkers stabbing, whipping and dragging the cows; filthy conditions; the shooting of sick or injured animals left to suffer until they died; and the carcasses of cows and calves caked in filth.

In a statement, officials from Fair Oaks Farms said the farms depicted in the video, Windy Ridge and Windy Ridge Too, are not owned by Mike and Sue McCloskey, owners of Fair Oaks Farms.

Likewise, Windy Ridge's owner, Steve Bos, admitted in a statement that the farm depicted in the video released Wednesday by Florida-based Animal Recovery Mission was his and outlined steps he's taking to make improvements, but said his farm is not part of Fair Oaks.

"I would like to make it clear that I do not sell milk to Fairlife, I am not one of the dairies of Fair Oaks Farms, and Sue and Mike McCloskey do not have ownership in Windy Ridge Farm," Bos said.

But Richard "Kudo" Couto, ARM's founder, said the Windy Ridge farms are "independently owned and run dairy farms but they fall under the Fair Oaks Farms umbrella."

ARM also conducted an undercover operation five years ago at a [Newton County dairy farm](#) affiliated with Fair Oaks Farms that resulted in [animal cruelty charges](#) against three people who had worked at the dairy farm. A fourth person also was fired.

ARM released video of that operation in June 2019 and it created a chain of events including a video apology from Mike McCloskey and multiple retailers, including Valparaiso-based Family Express, announcing they would remove Fairlife products from their shelves because of the Coca-Cola product's affiliation with Select Milk Producers Inc., which received milk from Fair Oaks Farms.

Fair Oaks Farms, in Fair Oaks, offers its Dairy Adventure, Pig Adventure and Crop Adventure, as well as restaurants and a hotel, billed as offering visitors the chance to learn more about where their food comes from.

Both the Jasper County sheriff and an official with the Indiana State Board of Animal Health confirmed they have opened investigations into the abuse allegations, though those investigations are still in their preliminary stages.

The video by ARM was taken on and off over the course of about 20 days in the spring by an undercover operative working as a heavy machine operator, Couto said. The worker had little interaction with the animals or workers and only took recorded video as he spotted abuse.

“The cruelty was just all around him,” Couto said.

Couto said his organization went undercover again because he wanted to see if McCloskey put into place the measures he pledged to after ARM’s last investigation. Those measures are outlined on Fair Oaks Farms’ website and include bringing in animal welfare experts; better employee training and education; and video monitoring.

“That is the only measure they did not put into effect because they don’t want people to see,” Couto said of the video monitoring. “The dairy industry is based on systemic cruelty. There are no happy cows.”

Couto himself came under fire by the Newton County prosecutor four years ago with allegations that an ARM employee working undercover coerced or encouraged the abuse of the cows depicted on the video, an accusation Couto denied.

Bos, the owner of Windy Ridge, said in his email that “I take full responsibility for the well-being of my cows and I am working with my farm team and veterinarians to assess the video footage and determine the immediate actions that need to occur.”

He also said he is cooperating with the state board of animal health and the National Dairy Farmers Assuring Responsible Management Animal Welfare program on their independent investigations to help better assess the issue “and create permanent solutions that assure me my cows will never go through this again.”

“As a dairy farmer, my first priority is always the welfare of my cows and I take full responsibility to correct any failure in the protocols we have in place to assure the well-being of my cows. Any behavior that puts their welfare at risk cannot be tolerated,” Bos said. “A full investigation of all aspects of the video is underway, during and after which disciplinary action will be taken, including termination of any and all employees and managers who have violated either our animal care practices or the law or both.”

Sheriff Patrick Williamson Sr. said he received ARM’s investigation in the mail on Thursday.

“We’re starting an investigation and we’ll go from there,” he said, adding the investigation could be forwarded on to the prosecutor’s office depending on what police find.

Newton County Sheriff Shannon Cothran also confirmed in an email that his agency is looking into the allegations.

Denise Derrer Sears, communications director for the board of animal health, said ARM has not made contact with her agency, though it was the lead agency four years ago when ARM brought up similar concerns.

“We feel some obligation to look into it because it’s the right thing to do,” she said, adding the agency is reviewing ARM’s video and is in contact with local law enforcement.

She confirmed that her agency hasn’t investigated Fair Oaks Farms or any of its affiliated dairy farms since the last investigation in 2019.

“We need to verify which farm this is on because there are multiple farms and they’re not under the same ownership,” Derrer Sears said. “We need to verify that it’s part of the Fair Oaks Farms.”

The investigation four years ago began on June 4, 2019, when the agency became aware of the allegations, and concluded on Jan. 31, 2020. That

report, provided to the Post-Tribune by Derrer Sears, focused on allegations of abuse at Prairie's Edge Dairy in Newton County.

“The ARM video documented areas of significant concern with regard to animal welfare and proper disposal of deceased animals. This included striking and kicking of calves, dragging live calves by body parts such as the calf's ears, and lack of proper carcass disposal,” the report states, adding, “The three main individuals seen in the video striking and/or kicking calves were fired.”

The dairy took several steps to improve conditions, the report notes, and “Mr. Mike McCloskey and management at Prairie's Edge Dairy appear to have taken the issues noted in the ARM video very seriously. Mr. McCloskey has taken steps to address these issues.”

That investigation took more than six months, Derrer Sears said, because “there was a lot to cover there” and she expected the same with the current investigation.

alavalley@chicagotribune.com