



Hernando sheriff slow to act against illegal horse slaughter ring, nonprofit says

In Brooksville, animal activists uncovered widespread abuse and illegal slaughter. Local law enforcement has made one arrest.

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Funny Biz, a retired racehorse, was illegally slain at a Brooksville slaughterhouse and sold, according to South Florida nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission. Illegally slaughtering a thoroughbred racehorse is considered a second-degree felony under Florida law and carries a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison.

Photo courtesy of ANIMAL RECOVERY MISSION

Richard Couto watched as men corralled Funny Biz and tied the retired racehorse to a tree. One man raised a rifle, took aim and shot it point-blank in the head.

The horse, a descendant of Triple Crown winner Secretariat, didn't die immediately. It convulsed on the ground until another man finished the job. He took a butcher's knife and plunged it over and over into the animal's heart. Still clutching the bloodied blade, the man turned to Couto and a group huddled behind him, who broke into laughter.

Then they got to work chopping up the carcass with electric handsaws and bagging it for sale.

Video captured of Funny Biz's slaying is just one glimpse inside an illegal slaughterhouse at the end of a cul-de-sac in rural Brooksville, where farm animals are abused, killed and sold in unmarked bags to be distributed to food stands and butcher shops around Florida, Couto said.

A spokesperson for the Hernando County Sheriff's Office said Wednesday that the agency is investigating the business.

But Couto, who had been undercover inside the farm for nearly two years, buying meat from the unlicensed business and earning the owners' trust, said the agency isn't acting fast enough.

In December, he shared all that he had found with the sheriff's office — hidden camera footage, illegally sold meat and recorded conversations with the business owners. Deputies have made one arrest at the site so far, records show. Couto says the slaughterhouse is still operating.

Couto founded Miami Beach-based nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission in 2009. Since then, he said the organization has uncovered more than 200 illegal slaughterhouses across the state. Under Florida law, horse meat marked for human consumption is illegal.

He was first tipped off about the Brooksville farm by an advertisement on Craigslist selling horse meat "by the pound," Couto said. When he and other undercover investigators licensed by the state to buy illegal meat to be used as evidence arrived to check out the slaughterhouse, Couto said they found obvious wrongdoing.

"They were walking up to pigs and beating them with two-by-fours. They were stabbing them to death. These are clear felonies in the state of Florida and everywhere in the United States," he said.

Wearing a hidden camera, Couto documented thousands of pounds of meat loaded into unrefrigerated pickup trucks to be sold around the state.

"They say, 'Today we're going to downtown Tampa, where we're going to a fruit stand. Today, we're going to a small little cantina or butcher shop,'" he said. "Other days they're going to Ocala. Other days they're going to Miami. Other days they're going to downtown Orlando."

Couto was shocked to find the business had operated for years without much discretion — neighbors and property owners had been complaining about the facility to law enforcement long before Couto caught wind of the animal slayings, he said.

He said neighbors have reported "rivers of blood" seeping onto their land. Walkers and cyclists on the Suncoast Trail, next to the property, have called Hernando deputies to report the abuse, according to Couto.

“I’ve been at the slaughter area as they’re chopping up an animal alive and people are yelling at me as they’re walking their children and their animals on the path, wondering what in the world is going on,” Couto said.

On July 6, Hernando deputies first made an arrest on the property, records show. Juan Alberto Hernandez Cruz, 54, was charged with animal cruelty, a misdemeanor.

Illegally slaughtering a thoroughbred racehorse, such as Funny Biz, is considered a second-degree felony under Florida law and carries a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison.

“The two owners were not arrested. They’re on the farm today,” Couto said. “That is unconscionable. It should be illegal.”

A spokesperson with the Hernando County Sheriff’s Office declined to comment on the case, citing an active investigation.

“You won’t understand until you read the entire report, which I can’t release right now because we’re still working with the state attorney,” said Denise Moloney, a spokesperson with the agency.

Couto said he will keep fighting to bring the animals held at the Brooksville slaughterhouse to a sanctuary owned by his nonprofit.

“I wanted a happy ending. I wanted arrests to be made and the property to be closed forever,” Couto said. “And that didn’t happen.”

Sheriff comments

On Thursday, July 25, at the end of a press conference on another matter, Nienhuis dealt with questions about the goings-on at the facility.

“We had an individual, a self-proclaimed animal activist, that went public on an issue and although the investigation is still open and I don’t want to go into a tremendous amount of details I can tell you that we disagree vehemently with some of the assertions that were made publicly.”

The individual, Nienhuis said, over the past year apparently became aware of individuals who might be willing to sell horse meat. He inserted himself into the situation and ordered the horse to be slaughtered, without law enforcement knowing or assisting.

Preliminary information is that he came from outside Hernando to meet individuals in the county and there is some information that the horse and the individuals might have come from Hillsborough County, the sheriff said.

They’ve been in contact with the individual since the beginning of the year to try to work a prosecutable case.

“We have run into some roadblocks, to say the least on that, including trying to get this individual signed up as a confidential informant,” he said. “But one of the things I can tell you that we would not do, if we were involved in this, is allow that crime.”

They would not let what happened on the video happen, even in the course of an investigation, Nienhuis said.

State Attorney Bill Gladsen said there's evidence, and then there's admissible evidence.

When people have an agenda, take matters into their own hands and say officials should do what they say, well, that's not how it works, he said.

There is an animal cruelty task force and it has gotten results. He will prosecute animal cruelty cases, but according to the law, Gladsen said. There's misinformation out there, he added. He's getting emails and calls, he added, from people "who don't really have the facts."

A detective is working on the case, Nienhuis said, and has been working on it to see if there is a prosecutable case, and if there isn't to put an operation together. That's not possible now because of the publicity.

He said the individual raising the issue has a reputation of being "difficult" to deal with.