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NEWS

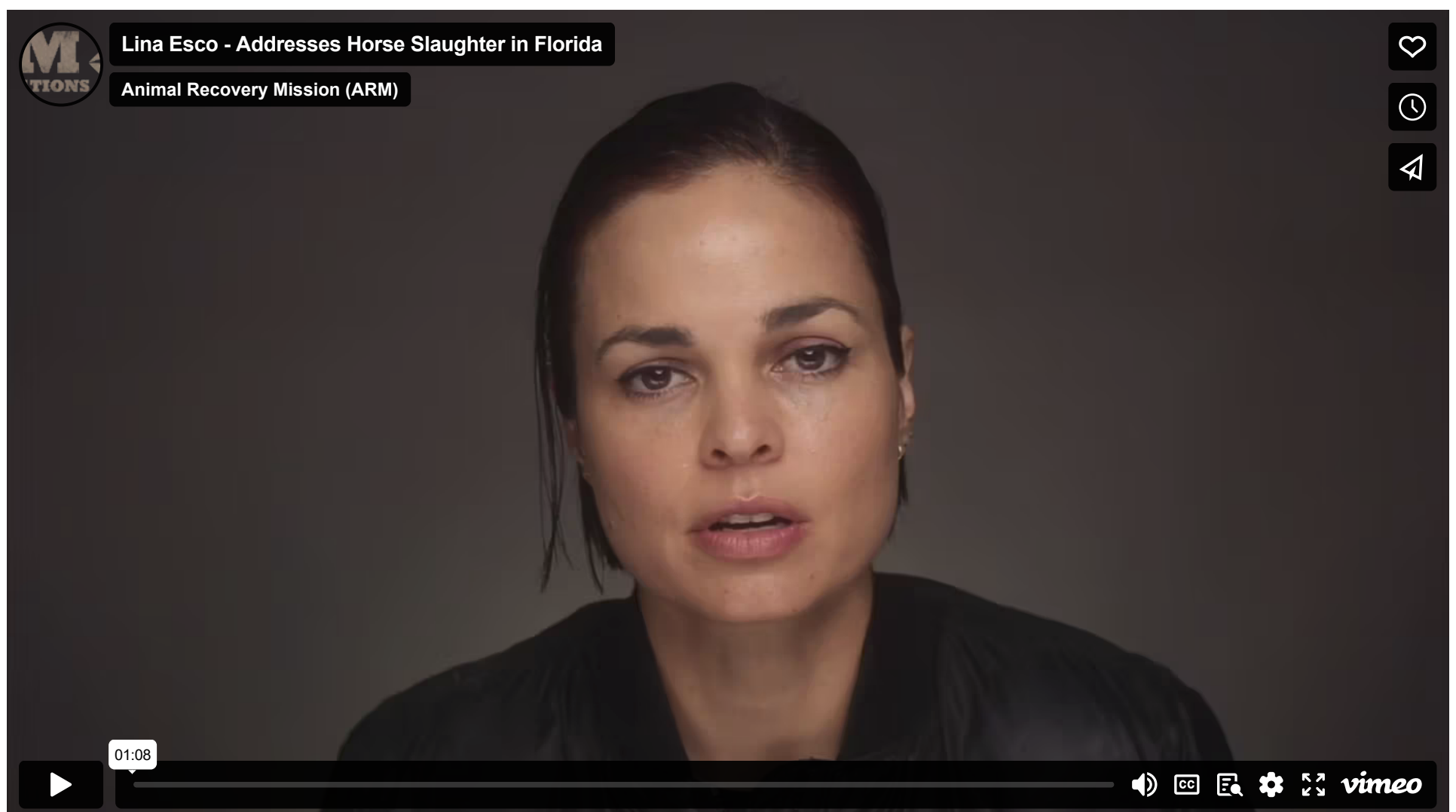
Animal-rights group sparks Florida horse-meat investigation

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Richard Couto, founder of the Miami Beach-based animal activist group Animal Recovery Mission, said he had witnessed the killing of a retired racehorse named Funny Biz in what he's calling an illegal act. According to Couto, the horse was tied to a tree, shot in the head, and then repeatedly stabbed until it died. The incident was recorded on video (edited versions were posted to Facebook and Vimeo), showing men dismembering the carcass with electric handsaws and then bagging the meat.

Law enforcement is currently investigating the Brooksville facility where Couto said the horse was killed. While there have been other arrests in Florida for evident animal cruelty, the specific circumstances of this case raise questions. The act of butchering animals, especially on a tarp under a tree, might be unappealing to the average consumer, but it does not necessarily indicate cruelty. Such methods are often employed in hunting practices, like dressing a deer.

WARNING -- VIDEO POSTS ARE GRAPHIC



Florida law states that it is illegal to sell, transport, distribute, purchase, or possess horse meat for human consumption unless it is clearly

labeled and sourced from a licensed slaughterhouse. Violations are punishable by a third-degree felony charge, a minimum mandatory fine of \$3,500, and potential suspension of business licenses. The crucial factor is whether there is evidence of cruelty or if the meat is being sold for human consumption without proper markings and inspection.

The United States has no U.S. Department of Agriculture-inspected horse slaughter plants due to a funding ban under the 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act. This ban prevents the Food Safety and Inspection Service from inspecting horses intended for human consumption, effectively prohibiting the legal sale of horse meat. Given this context, the existence of a thriving underground market for horse meat would be troubling.

The Hernando County Sheriff's Office said Wednesday that law enforcement is investigating.

The scene described by Couto and depicted in the video raises important questions about animal handling and the legality of the operations at the facility. Despite the stress Funny Biz displayed while being tied to a tree on top of a tarp, the horse licked her lips once the tarp was removed – a common response seen in prey animals. This behavior could suggest that the horse was not in as much distress as initially portrayed.

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ARM organized a press conference Wednesday morning to announce its “undercover” video, calling its findings “the largest illegal horse slaughter ring in the United States.” However invitations for agricultural media to attend the conference were not sent until two hours after the press conference ended, meaning no opportunities were given to ask questions or hear from the organization first hand. A representative for ARM did not respond to further inquiries.

In a published statement, Couto described the horse's convulsions after being shot, believing that it didn't die immediately. However, it's unclear whether this was due to any pain or suffering or whether they were twitching and convulsions that are often a normal part of the death process, as chemicals in nerve endings are released during the early post-mortem period.

An emotional element is introduced with the mention of Funny Biz's ties to racing and her lineage as a descendant of the legendary Triple Crown winner Secretariat. Yet Secretariat had more than 650 registered foals and countless descendants. This connection, while evocative, may be used to pull on people's heartstrings and amplify the emotional impact of the story.

ARM said that it has uncovered more than 200 illegal slaughterhouses across Florida since its inception in 2009. ARM said that the Brooksville farm came to ARM's attention through a Craigslist advertisement selling horse meat “by the pound.” Couto and his team, licensed by the state to buy illegal meat for evidence, said it documented severe animal cruelty at the site. Details provided by Couto about the facility's operations are alarming. He claimed the meat was loaded into unrefrigerated pickup trucks and sold to various locations, including fruit stands and butcher shops across Florida, though specific evidence of that hasn't yet been made public by sheriff's office investigators.

The humane processing of livestock is integral to ethical farming practices, ensuring that animals are treated with respect and care throughout their lives and at the time of their death. Equally important is ensuring that animal products intended for human consumption are safe, legally produced, and properly inspected.

The description of the Brooksville horse meat operation raises numerous questions about these standards. This is a developing story that will hopefully be clarified as law enforcement continues its inquiry.

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