



In Citrus Park, shock over slaughter allegations

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An investigator known for uncovering illegal slaughter operations in south Florida says farms in the Citrus Park area of Hillsborough County are also illegally butchering animals.

Business and land owners nearby say they're not surprised, because of the disturbing sounds they've heard coming from those farms.

Richard Couto of the Animal Recovery Mission says he has spent the past year infiltrating half a dozen farms, secretly recording video of what he says is inhumane slaughter of, and purchase of, horse meat on six different occasions.

"Kudo," as he calls himself, says he has hours of video to prove it—video he shared exclusively with FOX 13 News. He says all the farms are within a mile or two of each other in the Citrus Park area of Hillsborough County.

While some of his video looks like a rural scene, Kudo says what he documented is going on barely a stone's throw from busy highways and a popular mall.

The reaction in Citrus Park is shock, and disappointment.

Gustavo Vergara helps his brother run a bike shop in Citrus Park, right next to the Tampa Bay Trail. When we showed him a few stills of Kudo's video, he was stunned to learn what may be going on in his neighborhood.

"Shocking...I'm grossed out really, but mostly shocking...unbelievable," he said.

We also spoke with a woman who wasn't as surprised. Jennifer Flatt coordinates tour groups for nearby Big Cat Rescue. She says for years they've heard disturbing sounds coming from an adjacent property.

"You'll hear what sounds like horses or donkeys or cattle screaming, not their regular farmyard sounds, it'll go on for several minutes, then it'll just stop," Flatt said.

Three years ago, the sanctuary started building an 8-foot high fence around their perimeter, but Flatt says that hasn't stopped another ongoing problem: gun fire. She showed us several bullet holes in the wall near their leopard habitat.

"We've had to increase our security because we're hearing a lot of gunshots. Basically, it could be in the morning, in the late afternoon or after hours in the evening," she said.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has confirmed to FOX 13 that they have an ongoing investigation, as does the Hillsborough County Sheriffs Office.

But a sheriff's spokesman says the ban on selling horse meat in Florida that took effect two years ago doesn't forbid someone from killing a horse for their own personal consumption.

The man who wrote the Senate version of that 2010 legislation doesn't see it that way. Former State Senator Victor Crist is now a Hillsborough County Commissioner whose district includes Citrus Park.

"If for whatever reason there are loopholes here that others may have been clever to navigate through, then I would work to find a way to close those," Crist said.

Crist says he was horrified by what he saw on Kudo's video—not just what appears to be the sale of horse meat, but the slaughter of other animals.

"I would be concerned about this going on anywhere in our country," he said.

The commissioner says he's working with the county attorney to come up with an ordinance that would ban horse slaughter in Hillsborough County—period. That would require approval by the entire board of commissioners.