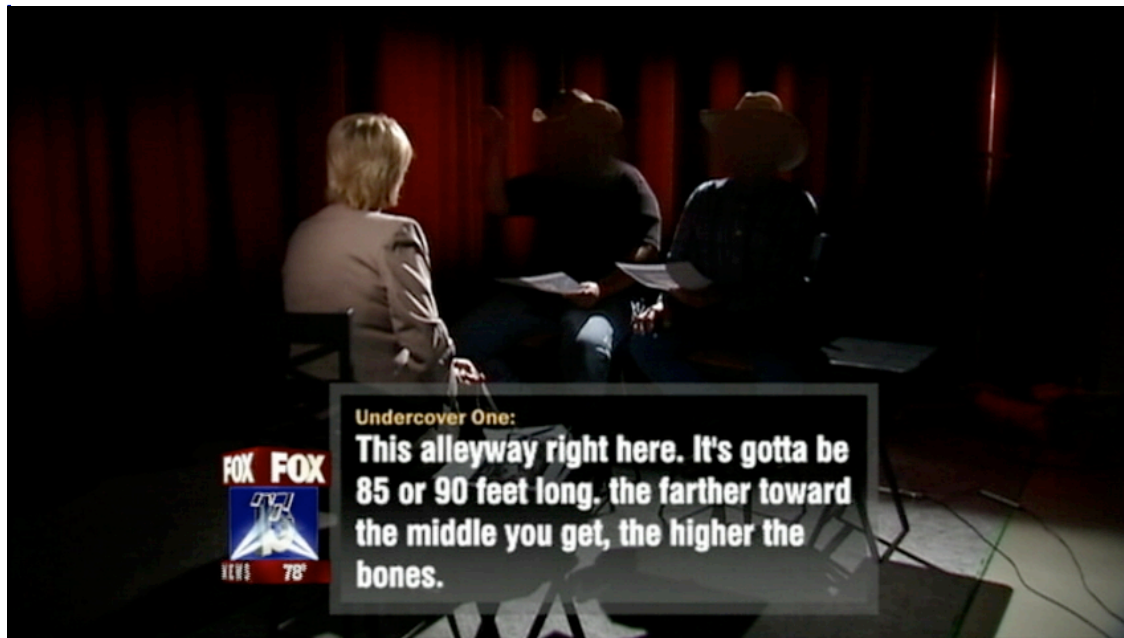




Witnesses describe horse slaughter farm

By: Cynthia Smoot, FOX 13 News
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Our series of recent reports on allegations of ongoing horse slaughter and illegal horse meat sales has shocked many of our viewers.

We've been contacted by many of you since we broke the story just over two weeks ago, including two men who came forward to tell us they knew there was a problem before Richard Couto of Animal Recovery Mission (ARM) went undercover in Hillsborough County and started shooting video.

We're not identifying the men, because they fear for their safety.

"It's like a mafia, and they will kill you," one said.

They say that when they saw some of the video in our [initial story on June 12th](#) , they knew exactly where it was because they'd been there.

One of the most graphic and gruesome videos shows what appears to be a pit full of skeletons and horse parts, including a clearly visible horse head. It's such a shocking image, Couto put it on the cover of his 40-page report.

The men we interviewed say they saw the same scene, only that it's even worse than depicted in Couto's video.

"It looked like a dumping ground for dead horses. It was awful."

They also say what appears to be a pit, is actually an alley.

"This only shows like 100th of what's there. This alleyway right here? It's gotta be 85 or 90 feet long. The farther toward the middle you get, the higher the bones, they were five feet deep."

They also say they saw the hog pen in Couto's video, the one scattered with bones and horse skulls.

"Dead cows, horse carcasses, feet, goats, pigs and the hogs were in there eating it...millions and millions of maggots. The worst stench of death that you've ever smelt. It was bad."

And one of the men says he was offered what became illegal two years in the state of Florida.

"He offered to get me an Appaloosa and butcher it for me."

"For you to eat?" we asked.

"Yes. For me to eat," he replied. "Somebody needs to be called. Somebody needs to come in and this needs to stop."

In a year-long investigation that began last June, Couto says he posed as a customer and went to six farms in the Citrus Park area of Hillsborough County. He says he made four horse meat buys, two of them accompanied by a USDA investigator.

"I've bought horse meat for \$4 a pound. Why cheaper here than in Miami? So many people are killing horses in Hillsborough County, and this is straight from the horse killers' mouths themselves that I have on tape," Couto said.

Victor Crist was the state senator who helped bring about the ban on selling horse meat in 2010.

Shocked and disturbed by what he saw in Couto's video, Crist, who is now Hillsborough County Commissioner, took his concerns to the full board. On Wednesday, the commissioners voted unanimously to ask local legislators to take up the 2010 ban and address any loopholes it may have.

The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office says while the 2010 law makes it illegal to sell horse meat, it doesn't ban slaughtering a horse for your own personal consumption. The board also voted to ask the county attorney to see what can be done at the local level to address the issue of the slaughter of all animals and where it takes place.

"What I'm asking for here is that we take a look at what we can do under existing state and federal law, and how do we tie it in to our ordinances so that we can be clear where and when and how you may and can not do this," Crist said.

FOX 13 learned today that after a meeting between ARM and the Hillsborough County Sheriffs Office, which a spokesman described as "positive," they'll work together as they continue their investigation

Thankful these two men came forward. It takes a public outcry like these two men did to make an official who does this on a daily basis be believed. Sad we have to struggle to get something like this so vile ended. Surely HCSO can find reason to take action on several levels.