



## Head of Nonprofit on Crusade To Close Down Illegal Florida Slaughterhouses.

By Hank Tester. Tuesday, Jul 17, 2012



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“They are butchering the animals alive, so they are basically cutting them up prior to death,” he says.

As the head of the nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission, Couto is a man on a crusade to close down illegal Florida slaughterhouses – especially those that sell horse meat.

“This farm, I have purchased horse meat on this farm,” he says of an undercover mission on one. “I have witnessed numerous butchering of living animals.”

Couto has video, chilling still pictures, and audio. In one clip, a slaughterhouse employee says. "There are a lot of people who kill horses too!"

Couto has amassed a collection of Hillsborough County animal slaughter videos, taken when he wore hidden cameras.

He also had success working with law enforcement in Miami-Dade County: in January 2010 a multiagency task force began the shutdown of numerous illegal slaughterhouses in the infamous C-9 area of northwestern Miami-Dade. The task force found over 100 violations including illegal slaughter operations, building code violations, disregard for public health standards, and hazardous waste dumping.

"Mr. Couto's done really a stellar job in putting together a case, (and) in teaching us also," Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle says.

For Couto, that's the smell of success. But in the Tampa area, where he has spent seven months and \$70,000 in an undercover operation, there have been no arrests and no massive raid, and Hillsborough law enforcement is cautious.

"When you're out there on your own and you're doing this type of activity without the supervision of law enforcement, it makes those cases even more challenging," Larry McKinnon of the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office says.

Meantime, there are new concerns that the state's law that forbids the slaughter of horses for human consumption does not ban slaughter for personal use or non-human consumption. One of that law's authors, former state senator Victor Crist, now sits on the Hillsborough County Commission.

"The law that I worked so hard on with my friends in Miami to pass is being disregarded," Crist says.

The law seems to work in Miami, where there have been arrests and convictions for the slaughter of horses as well as ongoing cases.

But McKinnon worries the law is ambiguous.

"It is not illegal to slaughter your horse. It is only illegal to sell the meat for human consumption," he says.

"The challenge is that we have to prove that these individuals are slaughtering horses, number one humanely, and number two, is that it is for human consumption. And that's that what we're working on, and we're working on it with Mr. Couto," McKinnon adds.

Couto says he's bought horse meat in Hillsborough County, has had it tested, and claims that the sheriff's department is less than cooperative. The department says Couto has not been able to produce horse meat buys while deputies were involved.

"They don't want someone coming into their community and showing them what to do and pointing out their faults," Couto says.

He might not be loved by the cops, but Commissioner Crist is on board.

“There seems to be concern that the words are a little too loose and they could be tightened up,” he says.

The Hillsborough County Commission recently voted 7-0 on Crist’s proposal to work with county code enforcement, the county attorney and state attorney to see what can be done locally – much like Miami-Dade County.

“We had the experience, the knowledge of the law, how to put a case together, and we had succeeded,” Fernandez Rundle says.