

VERDICT: Jorge Garcia GUILTY in Loxahatchee animal slaughter case

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A Palm Beach County jury has just convicted a Loxahatchee ranch owner charged with inhumanely killing two goats in a case captured on video last year.

The four women and two men announced they'd made a decision after 5 hours of deliberations, which ran almost as long as testimony in the trial that began and ended Tuesday against 48-year-old Jorge Luis Garcia.

Garcia was charged with two felony charges of animal cruelty along with two related misdemeanor charges. Jurors convicted him of lesser included misdemeanors on the felony charges and convicted him as charged of the misdemeanor charges of nonhuman killing of animals.

Circuit Judge Samantha Schosberg Feuer ordered Garcia immediately taken to the Palm Beach County jail, where he will remain until his sentencing April 26.

Garcia could have faced more than 10 years in prison if convicted on charges of felony cruelty to animals and killing animals in a nonhumane manner. Now he faces up to two years.

Just before the verdict, jurors received lunch and could be heard from outside of the jury room laughing.

“I know why they’re laughing,” Garcia said outside the courtroom. “It’s because this entire thing is a joke.”

But Assistant State Attorneys Judith Arco and Jo Wilensky on Tuesday told jurors that what Garcia and others did on his Rancho Garcia farm was a serious violation of the law.

Goats and other farm animals, they said, are supposed to be slaughtered in a manner that causes immediate and painless death. In a video they showed to jurors Tuesday, two goats slaughtered at Garcia’s farm appeared to die slow deaths as blood spilled from their slit throats as they hung upside down.

The videos were recorded by a member of the Animal Recovery Mission, an investigative animal welfare group created several years ago by Richard Couto. The investigator, who asked reporters not to use her name, testified Tuesday about one goat’s final agonizing moments.

“It was crying like the sound of a little baby screaming,” she said.

After the verdict, defense attorney Andrew Stine said he respected the jury’s decision but would be appealing the convictions.

His main argument will be that jurors should not have been allowed to see video that the ARM investigator secretly recorded on Garcia’s property. Though Stine in a pretrial hearing said it was private property, Feuer sided with prosecutors who said Garcia’s farm was operating as a business open to the public and fit a legal exception to a Florida law requiring two-party consent to record.

Stine says the issue has the making of an unprecedented appellate fight.

“A case like this hasn’t been decided in Florida,” Stine said.

According to Arco, Garcia has several prior felony cases, including an animal cruelty charge in a case sparked by conditions found on his farm when he was arrested and accused of running an illegal chop shop.

In the prior animal case, a judge withheld an adjudication of guilt and sentenced him to three years’ probation.

Couto said despite the fact that Garcia wasn't convicted of any felonies in this case, the verdict was a victory for his group and animal lovers in Palm Beach County.

Although the case involved a pair of goats, the ARM investigator in the case said other video showed Garcia "sadistically" stomping on the necks of ducks while laughing. And though prosecutors found no evidence of horses being slaughtered in the property, Couto believes that happened there as well.

"There was a lot more going on there than what you saw," Couto said."