

## Judge sentences former Loxahatchee farm owner to year in jail in goat slaughter case

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Jorge Garcia is led into a Palm Beach County courtroom April 26, 2016 just prior to being sentenced to 364 days in jail by Judge Samantha Schosberg Feuer. Garcia, the owner of Rancho Garcia farm, was convicted last month of four counts of animal cruelty for improperly slaughtering goats at his Loxahatchee barn. (Damon Higgins / The Palm Beach Post)

A former Loxahatchee farm owner will spend a year in jail for the illegal slaughter of two goats on his property last year.

Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Samantha Schosberg Feuer on Tuesday sentenced rancher Jorge Luis Garcia, 48, on four misdemeanor animal cruelty charges. Garcia will be required to serve one year of probation after his release from jail.

"There are reasons why laws against animal cruelty are in place," the judge said, adding that the conditions at the farm were "deplorable."

Last month, a jury found Garcia guilty of the crimes in a case that hinged on the undercover investigative efforts of Animal Recovery Mission, a Miami-based animal rights group. Garcia has been in custody awaiting sentencing.

Animal Recovery Mission founder Richard "Kudo" Couto urged the maximum possible punishment of two years and four months behind bars, because Garcia's farm was "just a filthy, disgusting place" where it was "almost like they enjoyed the torture of animals."

Before the trial, Garcia rejected an offer from the State Attorney's Office to plead guilty in exchange for a sentence of five years' probation, including six months in jail.

At the time he faced two felony counts, but the jury opted to convict on lesser charges after watching full-color videos of the slaughter from Garcia's farm Aug. 22 and Sept. 12, secretly recorded by the investigators and handed off to law enforcement.

Defense attorney Andrew Stine requested a 30-day jail sentence with credit for having already served that time, plus 11 months probation based in Broward County near Garcia's parents' house in Margate.

But Assistant State Attorneys Judy Arco and Jo Wilensky requested one year in Palm Beach County Jail to be followed by one year of probation, and a requirement to wear a GPS ankle bracelet to be monitored by the Sheriff's Office. They also asked that Garcia not be allowed to be around animals or work at a slaughterhouse operation during his punishment.

Stine called that recommended sentence "vindictive" because the jury did not convict him on any felony offenses. At the trial, the prosecutors argued Garcia allowed both goats to suffer by being strung upside down alive before their throats were sliced at the Rancho Garcia property, 15703 Orange Blvd.

While Garcia declined to testify at his trial, attorney Stine argued the videos don't prove the goats suffered, and the intrusion on private property violated Garcia's rights. The judge denied the defense's request to keep the videos out of the trial.

Garcia is appealing the convictions on the basis that the videos of the goat slaughter are illegal, Stine said. Because of the pending appeal, Garcia, a father of two 13-year-old twin sons, declined to comment at Tuesday's sentencing hearing.

The defense insisted that the goats were killed humanely. Arco said regardless of Garcia's punishment, she doesn't expect him to change.

"He will not change because he does not think he did anything wrong," she said. A case is still pending against another co-defendant, Rafael Ramirez, 50, described as "the butcher" by Stine. His next court date is May 17. Ramirez faces the same charges as

Garcia, along with one count of unlawful possession or sale of horse meat.