

Loxahatchee farmer pleads guilty to animal cruelty offenses

Written by: Marc Freeman Published on: August 17, 2016



Monieram Rathibhan, 59, the owner of Medina Farms in Loxahatchee, was sentenced Wednesday to three years probation including 90 days in Palm Beach County Jail after pleading guilty to five animal cruelty charges. (Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office)

Instead of jurors watching undercover videos of goats and other farm animals being illegally slaughtered, the charges against a rancher ended in a plea deal Wednesday. Now all eight men arrested in law enforcement raids of three Loxahatchee farms Oct. 13 have had their cases resolved, pleasing a Miami animal rights group that secretly recorded the videos.

Only one man took his case to a jury, resulting in convictions and a one-year jail sentence. The rest took plea offers from the Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office. The final deal was for Monieram Rathibhan, 59, owner of Medina Farms. With his trial scheduled to begin Monday, he pleaded guilty to five animal cruelty charges, including three felonies.

Circuit Judge Krista Marx sentenced Rathibhan to three years of probation, including 90 days in Palm Beach County Jail that could be converted to house arrest.

"You shall not possess farm animals of any kind," Marx told the longtime farmer, noting that the restrictions include "horses, cattle, cows, goats, pigs and ducks."

Rathibhan also is banned from participating in any animal slaughtering operations, and his property will be subject to random inspections by deputies who work in the sheriff's agricultural crimes unit.

Any violations could reopen the case, meaning he could face new punishments under the felonies that altogether are punishable by up to 25 years in prison.

But if Rathibhan fully complies with the terms, negotiated by prosecutor Judith Arco and defense attorney Christian Van Riper, he will not have felony convictions on his record.

Ex-Loxahatchee farm owner gets one year in jail in goat slaughter case
"I'm pleased to see he's doing some jail time with the violent crimes he committed," Animal Recovery Mission founder Richard Couto told the Sun Sentinel.

The organization has cited Rathibhan for allegedly torturing thousands of animals over three decades — "we are happy he's shut down," Couto said.

Years of community complaints about suspected animal torture prompted investigators with the animal rights group to pose as meat-seeking customers at Medina Farms, Rancho Garcia and Paso Fino G.A. Farm last summer.

A video from Aug. 22, 2015 shows a Medina Farms worker inviting one of Couto's investigators to watch the slaughter of a white goat on the property in the 2100 block of C Road. The footage shows the goat being placed on a wooden rack.

"Without rendering the goat insensitive to pain, [the worker] cuts into the goat's neck. The goat struggles and kicks violently, causing Monieram Rathibhan to grab its legs and hold it down," the arrest report states.

In a Sept. 9 video, Rathibhan is recorded shooting a black and white Holstein cow in the head with what appeared to be a .22-caliber rifle. The cow fell to its knees but didn't immediately die.

"A .22-caliber is not the appropriate caliber for a cow of its size," a veterinarian noted for investigators.

The cow struggled as Rathibhan cut its neck. As the cow kicked its legs, the worker proceeded to butcher the animal, according to the report.

In March, a jury convicted rancher Jorge Garcia, 48, on four misdemeanor animal cruelty charges concerning the illegal slaughter of two goats on his property, which has since been foreclosed.

While sentencing Garcia, Circuit Judge Samantha Schosberg Feuer said she considered testimony about how many farm animals, not just the slaughtered goats, were "tortured, brutalized and lived in squalor."

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