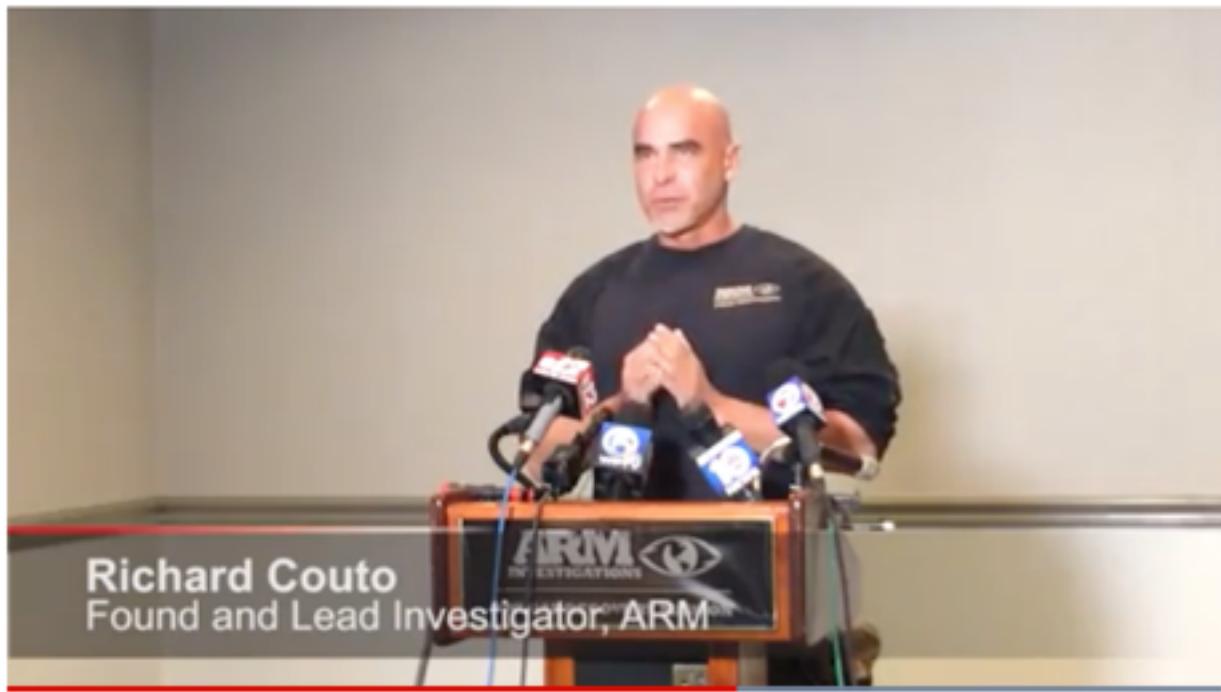


Criminal investigation opened into abuse of cows at dairy farm

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A criminal investigation has been opened into the mistreatment of cows at an Okeechobee dairy that supplies Publix, after an undercover video released Thursday appeared to show workers beating cows with metal rods and engaging in other abuse.

Okeechobee County Sheriff Noel Stephen said he assigned an investigator to the case after his office received materials showing apparent acts of animal cruelty by workers at Larson Dairy Farm

"I believe there will be criminal charges forthcoming on the completion of this investigation," he said at a news conference Thursday afternoon.

Publix announced it was suspending milk deliveries from Larson, saying in a written statement that the company was "shocked" by the treatment of the cows.

The video came from an investigator with the animal rights group Animal Recovery Mission, which has previously disclosed cruelty at illegal slaughterhouse operations in South Florida, who got a job with Larson in August, according to the group.



The Animal Recovery Mission, an animal-rights group, released video footage captured by an undercover investigator at Larson Dairy Farm in Okeechobee, Florida. The video shows dairy cows beaten with metal rods and other abuse. Larson Dairy said an employee shown hitting cows had been fired.

The video appeared to show a worker beating a cow on the head with a steel rod, as the cow, stuck in a narrow metal milking pen, moves its head wildly to avoid the blows. It shows workers kicking, beating and stabbing cows to force them into the cramped pens. It shows female calves penned in narrow outdoor cages, one with deformed legs unable to stand up.

"Dairy supervisors and milkers beat, stab and torment dairy cows with steel construction rebar," the narrator says. "The sharp metal rods pierce and

penetrate the cows' bodies. Kept hidden from tours and visitors to the dairy, the cows are brutalized."

Jacob Larson, owner of Larson Dairy, issued a written statement Thursday saying an employee shown hitting cows had been fired.

"We are deeply saddened and appalled by the actions witnessed in this video, which first came to our attention this morning," he said. "The unusual use of force is simply unacceptable on our dairy or on any other farm."

"We have strict protocols involving animal care and clearly the behavior shown in this video goes against everything we stand for and will not be tolerated. The employee involved and featured in the video has been terminated. Further corrective action will be taken if necessary as we continue to analyze the video and conduct an on-farm investigation."

He also questioned the animal rights group's tactics.

"We are equally concerned about the manner in which this video was brought to our attention," Larson said. "Had the 'undercover' employee brought this to our attention when it occurred, we may have been able to prevent it earlier."

Publix said it contacted the Florida Department of Agriculture, which plans to send inspectors to the dairy.

"We were recently made aware of the undercover video taken at Larson Dairy, Inc.," Publix said in a written statement. "Like you, we are disturbed by the images and shocked by the cruelty shown toward the animals."

Richard Couto, the animal rights group's founder and lead investigator, said the group had not selected that dairy because of any particular cruelty reports.

"We wanted to see what was happening in a typical, larger scale dairy setting in the state of Florida," he said.

"Upon our first entry, an hour of being undercover at the Larson Dairy, we were extremely surprised at finding strong signs of animal abuse, right then and there," he said. "The workers, the milkers, management, were punching the cows in the udders to get them into milking position. They were screaming. They were punching them in the face. They were kicking them and then large [bars] of rebar came out."

The sheriff said the materials received by his office, which included still photos but no videos, indicate that three workers were involved. But he said the Larson

family, which he has known for more than 30 years, would not have been involved in anything like the abuse shown at the farm.

“These gentlemen would not condone this activity,” he said. “Had they known about it, they would have fired them on the spot.”

At the end of the video, the group urges viewers to avoid supporting such abuse by giving up dairy and switching to a vegan, or plant-based, diet.