

Officials investigate Lake Wales egg farm after video alleges hen abuse

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Posted Jan 17, 2018 at 9:31 PM

Updated Jan 18, 2018 at 3:55 PM



LAKE WALES – A video taken by Animal Recovery Mission purporting to show crowded, cruel and unsanitary conditions at the Cal-Maine Egg Farm in Lake Wales set off investigations that again shined publicity on factory-farming conditions.

ARM, which is based in Miami Beach, first showed the video to Polk County Sheriff's Office investigators Jan. 3. The next day, three investigators from the Sheriff's Office and two veterinarians from the Florida Department of Agriculture's Division of Animal Industry, Bureau of Animal Disease Control, visited the facility at 1808 Tindel Camp Road. There, about 600,000 laying hens are housed in five, high-rise buildings.

The Sheriff's Office investigated animal cruelty charges and found no criminal violations, said Scott Wilder, public information officer. But based on the video, one charge of animal cruelty was filed against a single employee, he said.

The Department of Agriculture looked for compliance with agricultural regulations and found the facility in compliance, including providing at least the required 67 square inches of space per bird.

The overcrowding issue has been raised repeatedly by animal-rights groups, which point out that 67 square inches means each bird gets less than half of a square foot of space. A sheet of letter-size typing paper is 93.5 square inches.

Deputies talked with a worker who was shown on the video beating an escaped chicken with a stick that looked like a broom handle rather than properly euthanizing it by breaking its neck (officially called cervical dislocation). That man, Matthew Faulkner, 38, was fired by the company and charged with a single count of animal cruelty.

According to Faulkner's arrest report, Faulkner told deputies he remembered the incident, "admitted using the stick and said he made a bad decision and his actions were stupid." He later properly euthanized the bird, he told deputies.

Allegations

On Tuesday, ARM held a news conference in Tampa, unveiling the video that was shown earlier to investigators. Cal-Maine was quick to respond, saying it was a staged video.

"It is almost laughable that Cal-Maine said this was staged," said Richard Couto, president of ARM, who describes the organization as made up of abuse investigators, not animal-rights activists. "I don't see how it would be possible to stage it. Did we truck in a million cockroaches" and create the filthy conditions shown on the video, he asked ARM said that its undercover investigator spent two months working at the farm and "documented the hens in overcrowded cages where up to 10 birds were contained in one small battery cage."

Couto said the birds live their entire lives in the battery cages, where their wings, necks and feet can become lodged in the wire. "It is extremely dangerous and tortuous for the chickens," he said.

"ARM also witnessed extreme abuse and torture to the hens, who were kicked, punched, thrown, slammed against the ground, beaten to death with sticks, pulled apart alive, and jammed in cage doors where they suffered agonizing deaths from being crushed," the news release continued.

Couto said the Cal-Maine investigation is part of ARM's efforts to expose crimes against animals in factory settings and to raise awareness among consumers and legislators who do not realize the conditions the chickens live in.

"We do a lot of criminal-investigation cases in the state," Couto said. "Many times, when we document felony abuse with chickens, it is overlooked. This is the first time we have ever had a felony arrest concerning abuse of birds."

The investigation

The Department of Agriculture's inspection report, filed by Daniel Patrick Wolf, said that during a visual inspection of the Lake Wales facility, he and another inspector found "all

birds had adequate lighting, ventilation, feed and water, and the facility was very clean. While the temperature outside was in the low 50s, the temperature inside was in the mid-70s.

“Since the allegations included starvation and dehydration of the animals with mortality between 100-900 per day, we reviewed mortality and egg production records, as well as feed and water consumption from September through December 2017,” Wolf wrote.

He said there were, on average, fewer than 100 bird deaths a day. “If these birds had been starved or deprived of water, egg production would have been affected” but egg production remained stable throughout the period, he wrote.

In addition, he reported seeing only one cockroach during the one-hour tour indoors, and while looking around the outside of the buildings, the inspectors saw no feed spillage and found bait stations were placed every 100 feet.

The farm produced records stating all employees are trained in proper handling and euthanasia techniques, as well as whom to contact if someone sees another employee abusing animals, the report said.

A follow-up inspection is scheduled for Feb. 8.

Cal-Maine response

“The ARM video was taken by a former employee acting as an undercover activist, and he chose to disregard required farm procedures as part of his intent to misrepresent our efforts to provide proper care for our hens,” Cal-Maine responded in a news release.

“The employee’s job included identifying and addressing the type of issues shown on the video, and he failed to meet his job requirements.

“Cal-Maine Foods is an industry leader in accepting and implementing animal welfare measures,” the company said. “All of the company’s eggs are produced in accordance with United Egg Producers (UEP) animal care guidelines,” as well as “under full compliance with existing environmental, health and safety laws and regulations and permits.”

Cal-Maine said it immediately fired the employee who was mistreating the hen and pointed out it cooperated with the Sheriff’s Office and state investigators, providing access to the Lake Wales facility.

“They reported they did not find comparable conditions to what was shown on the video.” Cal-Maine said of the investigation. “We believe that this was an isolated incident and does not reflect the ethical standards of animal care expected of all Cal-Maine Foods employees. Further, we continue to work with our animal welfare team to prevent this from happening in the future.”

Cal-Maine, which is based in Jackson, Miss., is the largest producer and marketer of shell eggs in the U.S., representing an estimated 20 percent of domestic egg consumption, according to the company.

Cal-Maine's website says it markets specialty shell eggs under the brand names of Egg-Land's Best and Land O' Lakes, as well as to private label customers. It also markets cage-free eggs under the Farmhouse and 4-Grain labels.

The eggs are sold in national and regional grocery store chains and club stores, as well as to food service distributors, large restaurant chains and egg-product consumers.

Publix as a customer

Lakeland-based Publix Super Markets is one of Cal-Maine's clients and has decided to continue to do business with Cal-Maine.

It said it made the decision after conversations with the Department of Agriculture about its investigation, as well as with United Egg Producers "about the standards for animal welfare for egg laying hens" and with Cal-Maine on Cal-Maine's response to the allegations, said Brian S. West, media and community relations manager for Publix. Publix does not receive any eggs from the Lake Wales farm in question, West said.

"The information provided to Publix from all groups affirms our understanding that Cal-Maine is committed to the care and well-being of their animals," West said in a news release. "In addition, our own associates have visited the Cal-Maine farms that provide eggs to Publix to conduct animal well-being assessments. These farms are also audited annually by third-party animal welfare experts."

Publix will continue to monitor the animal-welfare programs of Cal-Maine and other suppliers, West said.