

Polk Co. egg farm accused of animal abuse after undercover video released

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LAKE WALES (FOX 13) - An egg farm in Polk County is under fire from an animal rights organization that released video Tuesday, saying it shows chickens suffering serious abuse.

The Animal Recovery Mission, or ARM, said it conducted an investigation that lasted about three weeks during which an undercover worker was hired by Cal-Maine Foods' Lake Wales egg farm.

The ARM activist claims to have witnessed and recorded deplorable conditions, including chickens crammed into cages and, in some cases, living with dead birds, as well as quarters that were infested with cockroaches.

During a news conference, Richard Couto, ARM's founder, told reporters his organization had a suspicion it would find unlivable conditions inside the chickens' housing systems, known as battery cages, and he believes that's what was recorded on video.

"What we basically wanted to do was to see what was going on behind closed doors at the Cal-Maine corporation and more in general, battery cage systems in the state of Florida," Couto said. "We found horrific conditions, some of the dirtiest, filthiest of battery cage farms every investigated in our country."

Couto said some of Cal-Maine's workers are guilty of serious abuse, sometimes hitting escaped chickens with sticks or even killing them with their bare hands.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office charged Matthew Faulkner, a former Cal-Maine worker, with animal cruelty based on the video recorded by ARM.

"They were being trampled to death by workers, they were being thrown against walls, they were being stomped on, they were being actually drowned in their own feces in the gallows," Couto said. "They were dying very long deaths of starvation."

Cal-Maine acknowledged one of its now-former workers was caught on video abusing a hen and told FOX 13 that worker was immediately fired.

In a statement, Cal-Maine said it is an "industry leader in implementing animal welfare measures" and called the video "staged."

The company put the blame on the ARM undercover worker, who had been hired as a hen caregiver. Cal-Maine said that man, "chose to disregard required farm procedures as part of his intent to misrepresent our efforts to provide proper care for our hens."

An inspection earlier this month by the Florida Department of Agriculture found no violations.

ARM, however, stands by its report and said this is one step in its long-term goal to "break open the door of these operations [and] show the public where their food is coming from."

Cal-Maine is a major egg supplier for Walmart and Publix. ARM is hoping the two major chain stores will sever ties with Cal-Maine until it addresses the alleged abuse. In a statement, a Walmart spokesperson said:

"We do not tolerate the mistreatment of animals and we're working with our suppliers to quickly and thoroughly investigate the actions shown in the video...and to take the appropriate steps to help ensure this unacceptable behavior cannot continue. We take

animal rights seriously and have strict policies in place to hold our suppliers accountable.”

A Publix spokesperson said they became aware of the undercover video Tuesday, and have not received any eggs from the particular Cal-Main Foods Inc. farm in Lake Wales.

"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. Based on all the information we have at this time, we have made the decision to continue doing business with Cal-Maine. We will continue to monitor the animal welfare programs of Cal-Maine and our other suppliers.”

Couto has spent years fighting animal abuse in Florida.

In 2012, his undercover video exposed farms in Citrus Park slaughtering horses for meat. He uncovered the same in 2015 at Rancho Garcia in Loxahatchee, with a video showing horses tortured and slaughtered for meat, and being skinned while still alive.

"Horses were being bought from the show horse community throughout Wellington, from thoroughbred racetracks, from auctions, from Craigslist," Couto said.

And, in November, [video from Larson Dairy Farms](#) in Okeechobee showed a cow herder beating, kicking and slapping cows to produce more milk.

"They will do whatever means necessary to get as much milk out of these cows as fast as possible," Couto said after the video came out.

Publix, which, at the time, sold Larson Dairy products, suspended raw milk deliveries from that farm. The owner of the farm fired at least one employee and suspended two others, saying the video goes against everything he stands for.

"Break open the door of these operations, show the public where their food is coming from," Couto said on Tuesday.

His mission is not just to push for awareness, but action. He wants companies to end the use of battery cage systems seen in his video from Lake Wales.

"The alternative is free-range chickens. They live in a pasture. You can buy those eggs at your local grocery store," Couto said.