

2 more arrested in connection with animal abuse at Okeechobee dairy farm

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(Photo: Contributed by Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office)

Two dairy farm employees charged with animal cruelty in Okeechobee County are the latest arrested in connection with a months-long investigation into the abuse of cows on multiple farms in the county.

Juan Carrasco, 35, and Juan-Carlos Hernandez-Camacho, 44, were taken into custody May 21 on misdemeanor charges of cruelty to animals after footage at Larson dairy farm showed the men striking the animals with a piece of rebar, according to court documents.

The May arrests bring the total dairy employees charged in the animal cruelty investigations to six. One other employee at Larson Dairy Inc. and three employees at McArthur Farms were charged in November and December, respectively.



Juan Carlos Hernandez-Camacho, 44, of Okeechobee. Charge: Cruelty to animals. (Photo: Contributed by Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office)

The Animal Recovery Mission, a nonprofit advocacy group, prompted a criminal investigation into area dairy farms in November, when an undercover member sent footage anonymously to the Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office of what looked like workers mistreating cows.

The group's undercover investigation began in August, when the organization decided to probe the dairy industry, founder Richard Couto said in November. Advocacy group members applied to various jobs on farms throughout the state, and a member was hired by Larson Dairy Inc., which provided milk to some grocery stores in the area, including Publix.

The group anonymously sent footage from the Larson dairy farm to the Sheriff's Office on Nov. 9, sparking an investigation into allegations of abuse.

Footage from the farm showed people physically abusing the animals, kicking them or hitting them with pieces of rebar that are supposed to be used to open and close the gates to the milking parlor, according to a probable cause affidavit.

One employee was arrested, and felony warrants were issued for four other men at the farm in November. The warrants withdrawn about a month later as detectives were unsure the identities of the employees listed in the warrants were correct, according to court documents.

Three employees at McArthur Farms, also a supplier to Publix, were taken into custody Dec. 13 in connection with additional footage gathered by members of the advocacy group depicting cows beaten by the men with PVC pipe and burned by blow torches, according to arrest reports.

Carrasco and Hernandez-Camacho were held at the Okeechobee County Jail each on \$1,000 bail, but have been released.