

Animal rights group accuses Fellsmere farm workers of animal cruelty, other abuses

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The animal rights group Animal Recovery Mission has accused a Fellsmere farm of animal cruelty following an undercover investigation. (Photo: CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ANIMAL RECOVERY MISSION)

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — An animal rights group has accused Fellsmere farm workers of inhumane slaughter practices and animal cruelty following an undercover investigation at the farm late last year.

The Miami Beach-based Animal Recovery Mission also accused the Indian River County Sheriff's Office and State Attorney's Office of failing to prosecute the acts, which group members said were caught on hidden camera during an undercover sting between June and December.

In a news release and at a news conference Tuesday in Palm Beach Gardens, group founder Richard Couto said workers at the Black Cloud farm were filmed inhumanely handling and slaughtering goats, and that workers sold live animals intended for "sacrifice" and "ritualistic practices taking place off site."

Couto alleged the workers failed to render the animals unconscious prior to slaughter, through a stunning device or other method.

"On this property, there were no signs of any tools to render the animals insensitive to pain," he said.

Assistant State Attorney Ryan Butler said he and another state prosecutor discussed with the Sheriff's Office the possibility of charges against the farm's owner, William Lathero, but deputies never presented a formal case. "Our job is to review warrant affidavits, and there weren't any in this case," he said. "It didn't reach that point. ... This was in the legal opinion stage." Lathero, who suffered a medical condition, died the day after his office consulted with deputies, Butler said.

"I never heard anymore of that from the Sheriff's Office," he said. "The case was over when he died."

Butler said the conversation with deputies occurred "months ago," but recalled it centered on the legality of selling animals for religious sacrifice and whether a goat was slaughtered in a "kosher manner," both of which are protected under state law, he said.

"The goat was bled. The way it was slaughtered, the throat was cut. I remember having a question, was the goat being prepared in a kosher manner?" he said. "I don't think they knew the answer to that."

Florida's Humane Slaughter Act allows the killing of livestock by the "instantaneous and simultaneous severing of the carotid arteries with a sharp instrument," provided it is done "in accordance with ritual requirements of any religious faith."

In a case report, deputies said the slaughtering was not done for religious reasons and, under Butler's advisement, issued Lathero a warning. Deputies also said they would report Lathero to the federal Department of Agriculture because the activities were performed without a license.

Butler said charges against farm workers were not discussed.

The Sheriff's Office will sometimes ask prosecutors to view video when consulting on charges, he said, but he was not asked to watch any video in this case.

Attempts to talk with anyone connected to the farm were unsuccessful Tuesday. Sheriff's officials said the farm was closed after the owner's death and remaining animals removed from the property.

In a prepared statement, Sheriff Deryl Loar said: "Based on the information provided by the State Attorney's Office to our investigators, probable cause for an arrest of (Lathero) did not exist prior to his death.

"The two men seen in the video, employed and directed by Lathero, have not yet been identified."

Loar asks anyone who may know the identity of the men to contact Deputy Luke Keppel at 772-978-6861.

If the men are identified, Loar said, the case could be reopened for potential charges.

A similar investigation by the Animal Recovery Mission led to arrests and reforms in 2017, after allegations of cruel practices at several dairy farms in Okeechobee