

Animal recovery group accuses Fellsmere farm of animal cruelty

Written by: Nick Samuel May 14 2019



PHOTO PROVIDED BY ANIMAL RECOVERY MISSION

FELLSMERE — An animal recovery group has accused two employees at a farm of extreme animal abuse – captured on video – and selling farmed and domestic animals alive for ritualistic practices that took place off site.

“They’re butchering these animals alive,” said Richard ‘Kudo’ Couto, founder of **Animal Recovery Mission, a nonprofit Miami-based animal cruelty** investigative organization.

ARM is asking law enforcement to investigate the group's claims that animals were killed at Black Cloud farm in violation of the Humane Slaughter Act. The sheriff's office Tuesday said anyone who knows the **identity of the men in the video – which is extremely graphic** – should call sheriff's Deputy Luke Keppel at 772-978-6861.

The animal group said both men have likely been at other farms in the area. Couto called the group's findings 'ghastly.'

"The only thing more shocking than the animal brutality taking place at the Black Cloud slaughterhouse is the lack of enforcement the case has received from both the Indian River County Sheriff's Office and the state attorney's office," Couto said in a statement.

The group said they contacted the sheriff's office in February and showed them pictures and video of the incidents. Couto said the sheriff's office showed the images to the state attorney's office, which declined to prosecute for animal cruelty because there was no probable cause.

Assistant State Attorney Ryan Butler said the state attorney's office never received pictures and videos of the incidents. Butler said the two men in the video were not initially mentioned and the complaint was solely against Lathero. "We want the sheriff's office and state attorney's office to change their minds and make arrests," Couto said. "That's their jobs – to protect the community, animals and uphold the law."

On Tuesday, the sheriff's office released a statement that the case could be reopened and the two men could face potential charges. Deputies also said Black Cloud closed after the death of owner William 'Billy' Lathero, a quadriplegic who died in February at age 62 in his Fellsmere home.

No animals are currently on the property, deputies noted.

Butler said during the investigation, deputies went to Lathero's home before he died, soon after getting the complaint. Butler said Lathero admitted to deputies he partook in improper practices of slaughtering animals.

Deputies issued Lathero a warning. But, the next day, Lathero died. The case was then closed, Butler said.

“We don’t prosecute dead people,” Butler said. [Lathero’s obituary described him as a ‘cowboy’](#) who took care of his animals.

The investigation

Authorities with ARM began investigating Black Cloud in June 2018. The animal group posed as customers and visited the farm several times, located at 11111 County Road 507 in unincorporated Fellsmere.

Undercover video captured a series of brutal attacks by two employees against the animals, the group said. The private agency said employees dragged the animals, including goats, by a rope through dirt and then sawed their throats with a dull blade.

“Each goat remained alive and endured excruciating pain for several long minutes,” the release shows. “Two of the goats continued to breathe and exhibited clear signs of life even as they were hoisted by a chain pulley off the ground and skinned alive.”

The group said the slaughtering violated the Humane Slaughter Act. The federal act, passed in 1958, was created to minimize an animal’s suffering during the slaughtering process through complete sedation, to the point where it feels nothing at all.

Slaughtering of animals used during religious practices are exempt under state law. ARM members said they purchased live chickens, a goat, and a puppy for sacrifice for different religious practices, including Santeria.

Such religious customs have been practiced widely in South Florida over the years.

Couto said slaughter farms typically use a captive bolt system that knocks out animals before the slaughtering process. A large bolt is thrust into the animal’s head before the farm owners let the livestock bleed out.

“The animal should be completely dead before the butchering process,” Couto said.

Couto said the U.S. Department of Agriculture visits slaughter farms once a year to oversee the slaughtering process and make sure all rules are followed. It was unclear if Lathero needed a license to conduct the animal slaughtering at his property.

ARM conducted similar animal cruelty investigations in 2017 at farms in Okeechobee and Polk counties and in 2018 in Palm Beach County, Couto said. Those investigations resulted in the arrests of several people later charged with animal cruelty.