

Horse Slaughter Investigation Resulting in One Arrest

Arrested;

Ortega, Jorge F
DOB: 11/19/1986
6327 Gant Road
Tampa Fl

Charges:

Sale of Horse Meat for Human Consumption

Outline of the Investigation;

During the summer of 2011, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office was contacted by Richard Couto, a self-described investigator for a non-profit group that he runs which is known as *Animal Recovery Mission. (A.R.M.)*. The group claims that the purpose of their organization is to raise awareness "...while fighting to stop illegal horse slaughter, shutdown of any and all illegal slaughter farms, Animal (sic) sacrifice farms, animal fighting farms and halting the round ups of the American wild Mustangs." Mr. Couto alerted us that he had knowledge that there were horses being slaughtered and that there were illegal sales of horse meat being conducted in Hillsborough County.

- June 10, 2011 – Richard Couto contacts the HCSO and claims that he has knowledge of horse meat sales and a slaughter house in the area of Gardner Rd and Sheldon Road in Hillsborough County. Detective is assigned to handle this complaint.
- July 1, 2011 – A citizen notified HCSO through that her horse farrier that he observed a large amount of horse skeletons at Cuesta Farms located at 11814 Meadowdale Dr.
- From July 2011 through approximately January 2012, Couto contacts HCSO on 5 to 6 more occasions and claims that he has leads on the illegal sale of horse meat. On each occasion, a detective prepares for an investigative operation, and on each occasion Couto calls the operation off at the last minute saying that the deal has fallen through.
- February 18, 2012 – Controlled call by USDA is made to Jose Ortega Jr. to purchase horse meat. Horse meat is unavailable at the time.
- February 19, 2012 – Controlled buy of horse meat at the direction of USDA was made from Georges Farm located at 6327 Gant Rd. Meat tested positive for equine species.

- February 29, 2012 – Package received from A.R.M. containing a pamphlet and several DVD's.
- March 28, 2012 – Controlled buy made from an unidentified female at 9614 Central Ave, Tampa, under direction of USDA. Meat tested positive for equine species. SAO declined to prosecute.
- March 31, 2012 – Assisted the USDA (at their request) with a site inspection at Georges Farm located at 6327 Gant Rd.
- April 25, 2012 – Lab Analysis Reports Evidence from the USDA and copies of the videos from previous incidents was received and secured into evidence.
- April 30, 2012 – Arrest Affidavit completed on Jose Ortega Jr., direct charges filed to the SAO.
- June 12, 2012, WTVT Fox 13 began running news stories regarding a number of farms allegedly engaged in horse slaughter and inhumane animal practices in the Citrus Park area. Richard Couto was the primary source in the stories.
- June 22, 2012 – The HCSO attempted to purchase horse meat from Tampa Steaks located at 1720 Columbus Dr W, negative results were met.
- June 26, 2012 – The HCSO attempted to purchase horse meat from the Latin America Super Market located at 7601 Palm River Rd, negative results were met.
- June 28, 2012 – Meeting held at the HCSO with Richard Couto. During this meeting, offers were made to Richard Couto to use him and any members of his organization as confidential informants to provide information about illegal slaughter and sale of horse meat. Mr. Couto agrees and states that he will contact Sergeant Raburn via email upon his (Couto's) return from vacation.
- July 3, 2012 – Couto was contacted to set up follow-up meeting.
- July 9, 2012 - Couto contacted the HCSO in attempt to schedule follow-up meeting.
- July 20, 2012 - Surveillance conducted at multiple farms, negative results were met.
- July 23, 2012 - Couto contacted the HCSO requesting proposal for joint operation between himself and the HCSO.
- July 24, 2012 - Manatee County Sheriff's Office contacted, negative results were met. Neighborhood survey and surveillance conducted, negative results were met for any horse meat complaints.

- July 25, 2012 - Pasco County Sheriff's Office contacted, negative results were met. Surveillance was conducted at multiple farms, negative results were met. Attempt to contact Peggy Lee, complainant from CFS. Negative results were met for any horse meat complaints.
- July 25, 2012 - Miami Dade PD Agricultural Crimes contacted. MDPD stated Couto sensationalizes reports of animal abuse and horse slaughter to get himself on the news for publicity purposes. Stated most if not all of the "investigations" he claims to have done in Miami were actually MDPD investigation, and he came in after the fact and took pictures and video and posted them on his website as his own investigations. The MDPD official stated that in many cases, the pictures and video were scenes where an animal died of natural causes or unknown means, and he represented them as cases of abuse or slaughter or ritual killings with NO substantiating evidence.
- July 26, 2012 - Large veterinarian services in Hillsborough County contacted, negative results were met for any complaints of sale of horse meat.
- July 27, 2012 - The HCSO contacted Couto via email offering dates to meet.
- July 27, 2012 - Daniels & Daniels Equine Services contacted, negative results were met for the sale of horse meat.
- July 27, 2012 - Contacted Humane Society local and national, negative results were met for horse meat complaints.
- August 2, 2012 – Surveillance conducted at multiple farms, negative results were met.
- August 7, 2012 - Couto contacted to set up meeting. Couto not available to meet. Surveillance conducted at Cuesta Farms located at 11814 Meadowdale Dr, a skinny horse with visible rib bones observed. Animal control contacted.
- August 30, 2012- Couto contacted the HCSO stating he would not be able to assist any longer. Couto provided no investigative leads or information from this point.
- September 27, 2012 - Couto contacted the HCSO via email requesting status of investigation.
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- September 29, 2012 - Couto contacted the HCSO via email requesting status of investigation. The HCSO contacted Couto via email informing him an active

investigation is underway, no further information will be released.

- September 30, 2012 - Couto contacted the HCSO requesting action be taken against the illegal slaughter farms.
- October 1, 2012 – Site visit conducted at Cuesta Farms, negative results were met.
- October 2, 2012 - Meetings with several doctors of veterinarian medicine were conducted, negative results were met.
- October 10, 2012 - Neighborhood surveys conducted at multiple farms, negative results were met.
- October 11, 2012 – Contacted Couto, he is now more concerned with illegal slaughters not so much horse meat.
- October 12, 2012 - Contacted Miami Dade SAO, unable to reach ASA.
- October 12, 2012 - Contacted Humane Society, negative results were met for any horse meat complaints.
- October 12, 2012 - Contacted Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, negative results were met for any horse meat complaints
- October 12, 2012 - Contacted Polk County Sheriff's Office, negative results were for any horse meat complaints.
- October 15, 2012 – Contacted Miami Dade SAO, ASA advised Couto may not act as a CI.
- October 15, 2012 – Couto's DVD reviewed of pig slaughter. Incident appeared to be in accordance with FSS 828.23(6).
- October 24, 2012 – Site visit was conducted at Braulio Hernandez's farm located at 7722 Gardner Rd, negative results were met.
- November 6, 2012 – Jorge Ortega arrested for sale of horse meat for human consumption.

A Crime Analyst reviewed calls for service involving potential horse slaughter locations during the time frame of January 1, 2011 – October 8, 2012 in the Citrus Park Area of District 3. There were approximately 90 calls for service that involved animals. Out of those 90 calls for service, there were no reports of horse meat being sold.

A Crime Analyst reviewed 228 calls for service that involved firearms discharging in public to determine if anyone heard horses being shot. Out of the 228 calls for service that were reviewed, approximately 4 calls mentioned gunshots being heard from a horse farm. Deputies and/or Detectives responded to each call for service and did not find any horses that were shot or deceased at each location.

There were approximately 60 neighborhood surveys conducted in the areas surrounding the farms. Of the 60 attempts, contact was made with 24 residents that live in the area. There was no new information that was gleaned from these neighborhood surveys other than two separate neighbors who though they heard an animal being killed (on different occasions and locations; no further information) and two neighbors who confirmed that Cuesta Farms sells and butchers hogs.

During the covert surveillance period and the consent searches, observations were carefully made regarding the health of the animals, their shelter, and the lack of foul odors or buzzards which would indicate decaying animals. The animals on the respective farms appeared to be in good health and well-fed and sheltered. There were no signs of slaughter operations.

Members of the HCSO Agricultural Enforcement Section as well as members of Special Investigation Division undertook an extensive investigation into all allegations made by Mr. Couto. During this investigation, multiple investigative methods were utilized that, included but were not limited to: conducting surveillance, conducting neighborhood surveys, contacting and questioning all surrounding agency Agriculture Units and all area large animal veterinarians as well as representatives from the Humane Society (US) and the local SPCA. All interviews met with negative results regarding any reports or knowledge of illegal animal slaughter or the sale of horse meat for human consumption.

Approximately 13 investigators, a crime analyst, and 2 supervisors from different divisions had direct involvement in this case. A consensus was reached that horse slaughter allegations in Hillsborough County proved to be inaccurate and unfounded along with illegal slaughter of other animals. Site visits were conducted at 8705 Meadowview Cr N, 11814 Meadowdale Dr, 7716 Gardner Rd, 7722 Gardner Rd, and 8432 Gardner Rd, negative results were met.

This investigation is now closed until such time new or additional information is received involving alleged illegal activity.

Larry McKinnon/PIO
HCSO