

April 16, 2018 Meeting

- 3/3/16: Meeting held at Ag Office. Meeting with Couto between Lee County Sheriff's Office (LCSO) and Agriculture Unit (AG) and Animal Recovery Mission (ARM).
- 3/14/16: State Attorney's Office (SAO) LCSO met with Assistant State Attorney (ASA) Cameron Siggs. The documents were provided by ARM (pictures and video). LCSO reviewed audio/video, pictures by ARM and were concerned as to the admissibility of the evidence. The LCSO AG Unit recognized a problem with the admissibility of the evidence, however it was still turned over to the SAO because the AG Unit was concerned about the admissibility of the evidence as it was possibly illegally obtained.
- 3/24/16: Siggs issued a denial because the evidence was illegally obtained and therefore inadmissible. Additionally, Assistant State Attorney (ASA) Siggs consulted with several experts in the field who advised no crimes had been committed related to animal cruelty. However, ARM violated Florida 934.03 Security of Communications Act.
- 3/24/16-2/8/17:
 - The investigation continued utilizing opportunities presented to inspect the property created by complaints regarding food and water shortages.
 - 2 calls for service at 7300 Eastwood Acres Cir
 - 2 calls for service at 7161 Eastwood Acres Cir
 - 2 calls for service at 7160 Eastwood Acres Cir
 - During this period, LCSO AG Units responded to the suspicious addresses on six separate occasions where they inspected the premises and practices, discovering no indication of criminal activity. During these occasions, the AG Unit assisted the USDA inspection and in total, Sheriff's Deputies responded to the premises approximately 20 times. At no time during any of these inspections, did the USDA inspectors or the AG deputies or patrol deputies observe any animal cruelty related activity.
- 2/8/17: ASA Siggs sent Sargent Hodges an email regarding a report of illegal sales of horsemeat and animal cruelty occurring at Rancho Las Delicias. The info originated from ARM.
- 2/16/17: LCSO and USDA met with ASA Siggs at the SAO to discuss the new information.
- 3/2/17: The LCSO Ag Unit and undercover (UC) detectives conducted UC operations at 7161 Eastwood Acres Cir (Las Delicias).
- 3/22/17: The UC investigation continued at 7161 Eastwood Acres Cir, with the purchase of a deceased hog. Detectives determined that the hog was euthanized by legal means (by firearm).
- 4/20/17: Ag unit and undercover detectives started investigating 7161 Eastwood Acres Rd and confirmed that the hog was shot.
- 4/21/17: UC detectives alone with the AG unit conducted an operation at 7161 Eastwood Acres Rd. UC detectives attempted to purchase horse meat. A deal was made to purchase the horsemeat and UC detectives were told to call next week. Approximately two weeks later, LCSO UC detectives were discovered and the deal was off.
- 4/25/17: LCSO received a call for service based on an anonymous tip. The Lee county Health Department was sent to investigate animal cruelty at 7161 Eastwood Acres Rd. ARM confirmed at a later date that they were the ones who notified the Health Department. Stayed active working with the state.

- 5/18/17: Sgt. Hodges spoke with ASA Siggs to discuss the case and to continue to attempt in identifying suspects.
- 6/5/17: LCSO met with ARM, the SAO, and Siggs at the state attorney's office. LCSO continued to investigate during the timeframe within this last month. Undercovers continued to try and infiltrate the business.
- 6/10/17: The AG unit contacted Couto via phone to set up a meeting to purchase horsemeat.
- 6/13/17: Couto and a white female met with LCSO narcotics and that is when Couto became very argumentative and hostile towards Sgt. Hodges and narcotics unit. LCSO special investigations unit attempted to utilize Couto and his associate in an undercover capacity to purchase meats, however, Couto refused to comply with Rachel's law and Couto's associate indicated she was cooperating only out a fear of Couto.
- 6/14/17: AG unit and ASA Siggs agreed that there was an inability to utilize Couto or his associate in an undercover capacity due to their refusal to comply with Rachel's law.
- 8/8/17: Undercover detectives in the Ag unit returned to 7161 Eastwood Acres Rd in attempt to purchase a second hog.
- 8/11/17: Undercover detectives along with the AG unit returned and purchased the second hog. When picked up, they could not determine the actual cause of death of the hog.
- 8/14/17: The AG unit prepared for an additional purchase of a hog.
- 8/14/17 - 1/15/18: Over these five months, LCSO AG unit continued to monitor movement, gather intelligence, and coordinate efforts with the intelligence unit to identify possible suspects in attempt to confirm the allegations of animal cruelty at these locations.
- 1/15/18: ARM contacted LCSO with more photos. They also provided two additional locations of alleged wrongdoing. ARM provided audio and video of a suspect during an episode of animal cruelty. State Attorney's office declared the evidence inadmissible in court due to the fact it was taken without consent according to Florida State 934.03.
- Early March 2018, ASA Justham met with ARM representatives and explained in detail how ARMS conduct was felonious and as a result precluded audio/video. ASA Justham again discouraged ARM's engaging in felony activity.