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Investigation into Conroe horse-breeding site continues

By Brandon Scott

A dairy farm and horse-breeding site in Conroe is under investigation by Montgomery County law enforcement officials, who executed a search warrant Wednesday afternoon in response to complaints of animal abuse and neglect at the League Line Road location. The business owners, Herman and Kathleen Hoffman, have bred horses there for nearly 20 years. But since last year, advocates on social media have accused the Hoffmans of starving and generally neglecting to treat the horses properly.

On Wednesday, Montgomery County District Attorney Brett Ligon, County Attorney J D Lambright and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were on scene for the search warrant and to assess the situation. Ligon said part of the assessment will be determining the size of the alleged neglected herd and how many, if any, horses would be seized.

Herman Hoffman told The Courier all of his computer devices and credit card machines used for dairy farm that sells raw milk were taken by police. He said no evidence has been found that he abused animals and called the uproar a social bullying tactic.

No animals were seized and no charges were filed as of Wednesday night. "We've got the vet who works for the SPCA," Ligon said. "We're looking at a very large operation, approximately 200 horses. The logistics of handling and feeding 200 horses for the County Attorney's Office and the District Attorney's Office and the SPCA are immense. It's not a decision that anyone is going to undertake lightly. We're still executing the search warrant. It's an ongoing operation and it's a vast operation. "As part of the search warrant, we're looking for destruction of any evidence, tampering of any evidence, moving carcasses. Part of the assessment is the size of the herd."

The search warrant affidavit shows law enforcement officials believe the Hoffmans could be concealing evidence of livestock animal cruelty, tampering of physical evidence and animals confined in a cruel or unusual manner, unreasonably abandoned, or appearing to be seriously overworked. The warrant also sought for records related to the number of animals on the premises at a given time, and business related documents on the purchase and sale of animals. Authorities also sought the ranch's employment records, the animals' medical records and burn piles of suspected livestock animals.

Four of the five witnesses who gave statements to police said they saw the Hoffmans burn several horses on the property to keep from dumping them. One former employee of the dairy farm, who spoke on the conditions of anonymity, said she wants to expose the truth of animal neglect at the facility, where an unconfirmed number of horses have died recently. The ex-employee said that the Facebook group dedicated to this cause, Justice for League Line Road horses Conroe, Texas, which surpassed 4,000 likes Wednesday, "does not have all of the facts straight, but they are correct that the animals are indeed neglected, to the point of death."

Herman Hoffman called the allegations against him “social bullying” and likened the situation to a witch hunt that began with extreme advocates on Facebook. “This is a herd of horses. These are not pets at the county fair,” Hoffman said. “These horses ran in a herd. They’re not even halter broken.”

Former employees and the Hoffmans dispute the number of horses that have died recently, with the employees estimating the number closer to 30 and the Hoffmans saying it’s only been about 10. “Something must be done,” the former employee said. “Those are not just old horses dying of old age. There were young horses dying, purely from neglect. The horses close to the dairy are the fat ones. The rest are in places out of view.” The former employee said a 3-month-old foal was rescued by another employee Saturday and placed into a veterinarian’s care before dying.

The veterinarian from the Brazos Valley Equine Hospital said the horse, named Tequila, weighed only 94 pounds at 3 months old, as opposed to the expected 150 to 175 pounds. Tequila had multiple areas of hair loss over his topline and face, likely attributed to rain rot, according to the vet’s report. Tequila also suffered from “very low glucose” and anemia. “If he had a mare to nurse, it is unlikely she was producing enough milk,” the report states. “This colt appears to have been starved to the point of death. There is evidence of severe metabolic disturbances and endocrine dysfunction related to the poor management. When a small amount of nutrition was provided, it induced a refeeding syndrome.”

Herman Hoffman said the foal was given to an employee who was to be its sole caregiver from the day it was born. Just a few weeks ago, Hoffman said, the former employees changed the horse’s milk from goat milk to grain, supposedly because the horse was not eating. “This is a baby, they gave it grain and it died. I wonder why,” Hoffman said. “They were totally in charge of taking care of this baby.”

However, the former employee who spoke with The Courier said employees and volunteers tried to help the animals but only could work within the scope of what the Hoffmans would allow. On Saturday, she said, a situation with employees escalated to the point that Herman Hoffman pulled a gun and fired it several times. She said he then locked himself in the house and threatened suicide. Police responded to the scene but no arrests were made.

Sarah Connor, who started working at the dairy farm in August 2012, said the horses were already in poor condition. “They were just feeding them hay, which is really bad for the horses,” Connor said. “There were too many horses per acre, so they weren’t getting the nutrients they needed from the grass. And then there were some horses in a barn only getting hay, but access to the grass. “As I was working there, the pastures just kept getting more depleted. So the horses just kept getting skinnier and skinnier.” Connor said she saw one horse close to death, so she started feeding the horse out of pocket.

“The owners wouldn’t pay for the feed so I started paying for it myself,” Connor said. “I paid for her medications and feed, all of that. I finally get her back up to health around April 2013 and I’d quit because they kept neglecting the animals and wouldn’t let us give them the proper care. I quit because of that. I just couldn’t stand seeing the horses like that anymore. “I kept in contact with Justice for League Line Road Facebook and we kept on trying to get law officials to do something about it. They kept ignoring us. They don’t treat their animals right and they don’t treat people right either.”

Herman Hoffman blamed the poor care of horses on his own trouble hiring good workers. He said they are not always fed properly by his staff, which has high turnover. He noted that very few of the horses are skinny and suffering from various health issues, but all are in different stages of life.

*Catherine Dominguez, Stephen Green and Jason Fochtman contributed to this report.