

# THE COURIER

OF MONTGOMERY  COUNTY

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## SPCA officials take horses into care following alleged cruelty investigation

By: Jay R. Jordan

The Houston SPCA animal cruelty division took dozens of horses from Premium Star horse ranch off League Line Road in Conroe where almost 200 horses were seized by Montgomery County officials this week. The SPCA assessed the horses Thursday and took some to their Houston facility in order of importance of veterinary need.

One of the horses from the first group to leave the ranch suffered from open wounds on both sides of its hips, which had scabbed over. Another horse showed its skeletal structure from its ribs to its hips from malnutrition. All five of the horses from the first group to leave around 1:45 p.m. on Thursday had unkept hooves, causing each to walk on the bottom joints of their legs. "We see things like this on a daily basis. You just don't see it in such a large group at one time," HSPCA President Patti Mercer said as the first group of horses set off for Houston. "It's heartbreaking, because this didn't happen overnight. It takes a long time (for the horses) to get like this. This is suffering that takes place over time. "We're hoping today's the day life changes for them."

The HSPCA anticipates spending roughly \$500,000 in total to take care of the horses, a cost which includes everything from blood tests to feed for the horses. Mercer said more than \$3,000 can be spent on a single horse. The county is providing feed and water for the horses, at least over the next 10 days at a cost of roughly \$15,000, officials said Wednesday night.

Montgomery County Attorney JD Lambright said the owners of the farm, Herman and Kathleen Hoffman, moved five horses from their property before law enforcement arrived, adding those animals are included in the seizure and considered county property as well.

The Hoffmans were arrested Wednesday evening after law enforcement officials spent more than 12 hours on the property trying to determine the extent of the alleged cruelty. Herman and Kathleen Hoffman each face three misdemeanor counts of animal cruelty, with a \$11,500 bond amount per defendant. Prosecutors say those charges could be elevated pending further investigation.

The County Attorney's Office obtained an order from Precinct 1 Justice of the Peace Wayne Mack to temporarily seize the horses targeted in the investigation. Given the size of the herd and the conditions of the animals, officials said the majority of the horses will remain on the farm. Montgomery County Sheriff's Office deputies will remain on the property around the clock to ensure the animals are protected while they receive care.

Ligon said in a press release Thursday that although law enforcement had done everything possible to work with the Hoffmans to ensure adequate care for the horses involved, "ultimately it became clear that more direct action was required." He recommended that anyone interested in assisting with the care of the horses contact the Houston SPCA at 713-869-SPCA (7722). Residents can also visit

[www.HoustonSPCA.org](http://www.HoustonSPCA.org) to volunteer or donate to help the non-profit with expenses associated with the rescue.

“This is a massive undertaking that has required and will require a tremendous amount of time and financial resources in order to save and support these horses over the long term,” Ligon said. “The Houston SPCA is leading the efforts to provide veterinary and basic care to those horses that need it and they should be the contact for those wishing to donate their time or money to the cause. We will continue to partner with the County Attorney and other law enforcement officials to obtain justice for these animals.”

The Hoffmans are set to appear before Judge Mack on Tuesday to face civil charges but it was uncertain when the two will make their first court appearance related to the criminal charges. Animal cruelty investigators began investigating the couple in October following multiple complaints from former employees of alleged mistreatment of the animals.

The Hoffmans have owned and operated the breeding facility and a dairy on the property for more than 20 years. The property also has a small store where the couple sells raw milk and butter. Herman Hoffman on Wednesday denied all allegations that he abused animals, instead placing the blame on inept employees. He said the herd operates within different social constructs and some of them do not thrive as others do.

Still, law enforcement officials said the Hoffmans are still required to provide a certain standard of care, even to the animals that are not “thriving” within their own social construct.

*\*Brandon K. Scott and Catherine Dominguez contributed to this report.*