



# Starving cattle amid high prices for feed in Neb.

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By Nate Jenkins, Associated Press Writer



by Anonymous, AP

This undated photo provided by the Merrick County sheriff's office, shows a cow that investigators say may have starved to death near Grand Island, Neb., and one of about 240 that died of starvation in Nebraska this year. Officials say neglect cases are on the rise, and some suspect the higher price of feed has something to do with it. (AP Photo/Merrick County Sheriff's Office, file)

BUTTE, Neb. — The dead were stacked in two piles, 70 cows in one, 30 in another, hidden away in the crevices of this scenic, hilly ranch country where cattle outnumber people.

Carl Schuman, a former county prosecutor who owned the cattle with his two brothers, says he knows what happened: They died "mostly of old age, and some younger ones got pneumonia."

But state investigators have another theory about what happened earlier this year on the Schuman ranch, where pastures this summer were nearly stripped bare from overgrazing while grass in adjoining pastures was about a foot high.

They think the animals might have starved to death.

Investigators haven't had to go out of their way to find dead cattle in Nebraska, where 6.5 million head roam. Since early this year, three cases of alleged starvation deaths involving a total of about 240 cattle have been reported in Nebraska -- more than some officials can recall.

The state Attorney General has been investigating the Schuman ranch deaths since shortly after the piles were found March 15. No charges have been filed.

The latest case of alleged neglect surfaced earlier this month in southeastern Nebraska near Fairbury. Officials said they found many of the cows in a herd of about 80 near death at a defunct dairy farm.

The third case came in late April, when 25 cattle carcasses were found in a Merrick County pasture just outside of Grand Island. Ted Robb and Dustin Dugan pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of improper disposal of carcasses after felony animal neglect charges were dropped. They now face fines instead of jail time.

And in January, 111 cattle were found starved to death and another 140 emaciated in Red Willow County. Charges were never filed against the owner.

"Neglect cases are on the rise, and what's causing it, I'm not sure," said Steven Stanec, executive director of the Nebraska Brand Committee, a state agency that helps police the cattle industry. "We're having whole herds of hundreds of cattle being neglected."

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Stanec and others say the cases from early this year don't share a clear-cut cause. But, he said, "I would say the higher price of feed has something to do with it."

In recent months the per-ton cost of hay has risen by about 80 percent, adding to the already high costs of other feed caused by lofty corn prices, which have slipped recently.

High commodity and fuel prices have encouraged farmers to stop raising hay, which is mostly used to feed cattle in the winter and early spring, said Neil Tietz, editor of Hay & Forage magazine. Tietz said hay prices are "certainly the highest I've ever seen."

And even with the recent drops in oil and commodity prices, Tietz expects hay prices to creep higher this coming winter, which could cause even more cases of starvation.

Livestock experts and those who track animal abuse cases nationally, including the Humane Society of the United States, say they don't know whether livestock neglect cases are on the rise across the country.

But they predict high hay prices will lead to more cattle herds slowly wasting away from starvation in remote pastures.

"We are going to have more cases of this," said Temple Grandin, professor of animal science at Colorado State University. She said starvation that can often take months to cause death is the worst type of animal abuse.

"There's no excuse for livestock starving to death," Grandin said angrily when told of the Nebraska cases. "You can always sell them. They might not be at a good price, but you can always sell them."

The cattle industry is already nursing a black eye following widespread circulation of videos recorded by undercover investigators for the Humane Society of the United States. They showed alleged abuse of livestock in slaughterhouses and sale barns, including a video from early this year of crippled and sick cows at a California slaughterhouse being shoved with forklifts.

In the Red Willow County case where 111 cattle were found starved to death, an investigator who went to the ranch described a grim, surreal scene. Some of the carcasses were frozen in a pond. The cattle had broken through the ice trying to get water.

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The owner had gone through a divorce, his tractor had broken down and "hay was too high and he couldn't afford to buy it," said David Horton, an inspector with the Nebraska Brand Committee.

"He just kinda gave up on life," Horton said.

The man wasn't charged with any crimes. Red Willow County Attorney Paul Wood said doing so would have cost too much because the county would have had to take custody of the remaining live cattle during court proceedings.

"We were going to have to take care of 140 head of cattle -- feed, water and get vet care for them for a long time," Wood said. He estimated the cost at around \$80,000.

"It was an unfortunate decision, but we made the best decision with the best interests of the live cattle," which the man sold, Wood said.

Similar decisions aren't uncommon in close-knit rural areas where it's "harder to throw the book" at offenders, said Dale Bartlett of the Humane Society of the United States.

Prosecution is also bypassed because livestock abuse doesn't cause the same level of public uproar as abuse to pets such as dogs, said Bartlett.

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