

Recent deaths of six cows in Crook County, and possible mutilations, puzzle police, veterinarian

By Garrett Andrews
The (Bend) Bulletin

BEND — The udders appeared to have been removed with precision — straight, even cuts, as if made by a sharp object.

The reproductive systems had been cut out cleanly as well, and without disturbing other organs.

There was no indication of predator activity and perhaps strangest of all, scavenging animals appeared to have hardly touched these six cow carcasses found in a seven-day span this year on ranchland in rural Crook County.

Detectives with the Crook County Sheriff's Office, longtime ranchers and a Prineville veterinarian who reviewed evidence from an ongoing case say they're stumped by the "unnatural" deaths.

But the mutilated cattle might be more ordinary than they seem, according to Brian Dunning, a Bend-based podcaster committed to deflating wild claims.

"This reads like a very typical case," he said.

Crook County Sheriff John Gautney said his office has no leads but cautioned there's "no reason to panic."

"We've had cases like this over the years," Gautney said. "They seem to come in groups and then go away. We are not speculating on how these are happening, as we try to keep an open mind and look at all possibilities."



EO Media Group File Photo

Police have called the recent deaths of six cows in Crook County "unnatural."

Mutilated cattle have been reported in the American West since at least the 1960s. There have been multiple recent cases of bull mutilations in Harney, Wheeler and Umatilla counties in Eastern Oregon. But now, beef cattle have turned up dead in the remote ranchlands outside Prineville bearing signs common to the cattle mutilation phenomenon.

The current string of cases began Feb. 27, when Crook County Sheriff's Office deputy Scott Durr was dispatched to suspicious circumstances at the 96 Ranch on SE Van Lake Road. Owner Rickey Shannon said one of his herd had been discovered dead two days earlier with an odd cut down its spine.

Shannon, who lives on the ranch with his two sons, reported no predators or birds had touched the cow. There were no tracks, and

no blood surrounding it. The cow's left cheek, tongue and three of its teats had been cut away cleanly. But the eyes, usually the first body part to be scavenged after death, were untouched. There were no bullet holes and a scan of the cow by a metal detector turned up none.

The cow was about 200 yards from the road, near the edge of a field and some juniper trees. There were no vehicle tracks near the dead animal, no footprints of any kind.

The mystery deepened a few days later. On March 4, Casey Thomas, manager of the GI Ranch on Lister Road in Paulina, reported that one of his herd of around 5,000 appeared to have suffered a strange death.

Crook County detective Javier Sanchez arrived to find a deceased Black Angus cow lying on its side. Hair had been

removed near the stomach. All four udders were cut off and its left cheek, tongue and sex organs removed. Between the front legs an uneven patch of hair was missing and in the middle was a prick mark, Sanchez wrote in his report.

The next day, Crook County's Sgt. Timothy Durheim was dispatched to a report of a wolf kill at the McCormack Ranch on SE Bear Creek Road. But it was apparent no wolf took down this cow.

Durheim noted several straight incisions on the animal. One udder had been removed and a circular cut was made around the anus and the reproductive organs removed without puncturing the gut. The left cheek, left eye and tongue had been removed.

"Again, I noted straight, clean incisions where the cheek had been," Durheim wrote in his case report.

Durheim examined the carcass and found a puncture wound between the neck and shoulder. He found no bite marks.

"There were no apparent animal or human tracks immediately surrounding the carcass, and only minimal blood in the area," Durheim wrote. "I know from personal experience that if an animal is killed or scavenged by predators, there is typically a large bloody messy area surrounding the carcass."

On March 6, Casey Thomas

called police back to report finding another dead cow bearing the same strange injuries. This one was more badly decomposed than the first but its left cheek was also removed and a 2-inch patch had been cut into the hair on its neck.

Detectives took photos of the dead cows to Prineville veterinarian Dr. Taylor Karlin for her perspective. She agreed the deaths appeared unnatural and her opinion was included in a search warrant request filed in the case to scan for cell phone activity near where the cows were found.

Charges in any of the cases could include trespassing and aggravated animal abuse. With the cattle valued at \$1,250 to \$1,400 each, criminal mischief might also be charged.

As a vet with an interest in large animals, Karlin has performed many post-mortem examinations on deceased livestock. When, and if, another mutilated cow turns up in Crook County, Karlin has agreed to perform an appropriate necropsy so she can personally examine a fresh specimen if another turns up.

"I wish I had an answer," she said. "We're kind of at a loss."

One possible explanation is these were, in fact, natural deaths.

Podcast host Dunning's long-running show Skeptoid devoted an episode to debunk-

ing cattle mutilation in 2015. Dunning, who read the 28-page search warrant request, called the recent Crook County case typical of numerous accounts often attributed to aliens or satanic rituals.

"This is almost certainly the same kind of bird predation we've seen in so many similar cases," he wrote to The Bulletin. "In my opinion, there is nothing here that suggests anything but normal and expected bird predation had occurred, and ... no justification for a search warrant to seek out an apocryphal human responsible for the wounds."

Dunning said he's learned there's actually a short window of time between when the animal dies and when its body is scavenged when it's obvious what killed the animal.

"Most particularly birds, and also some insects, will always go first for the exposed soft tissue: eyes, tongue, lips and mouth area, genitals. The animal is dead with zero blood pressure so there is never significant bleeding from post mortem wounds. The body is in the process of drying and decaying, so skin pulls tight from around the excised area, giving the impression of a perfect surgical cut."

Karlin is awaiting the results of liver and blood samples she's sent away for lab testing. Police have sent hair samples to the state crime lab on the chance they don't belong to the bovine.

LANDMARK

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"We don't have the top-down ability or will to enforce the kinds of precautions that are required to keep people safe," said Herivel. "It's this attitude (among prison staff) that comes with, 'You're not going to tell me what to do.' But the most serious way to spread the virus is through staff, who are the vectors coming in and out. If they can choose to not wear masks and there are people that can be infected, then they are still a lethal threat."

Herivel said that hesitance on the part of Department of Corrections leaders to discipline their officers likely has to do with understaffing that the agency has experienced throughout the pandemic.

"The Department of Corrections really capitulated to the union," she said.

According to Herivel, her group reached out to the union to join the effort to make the prison more safe, thinking that "nobody wants to spread disease." She said they couldn't connect with union representatives.

Officer Alan MacLean, an SRCI officer and president of the local Oregon AFSCME Corrections union, didn't respond to a request for comment from the Enterprise.

However, emails included in court filings showed Oregon Department of Corrections officials begging staff to comply with masking recommendations.

"Team, I need your help," said Heidi Steward, agency deputy director wrote in an email dated July 13. Steward warned her staff that the agency was facing legal action "for not following our face covering protocol" and implored officers to get on board.

"It is becoming difficult to stand our ground on our current directive (regarding masks), as not all of us are following it. If we do not pull together and wear our face coverings when we can't maintain 6 feet of social distancing, we may be mandated to wear masks at all times."

Steward's warning was prescient. By November, all prison officers were required to wear a mask on duty at all times regardless of distancing.

Dr. Mark Baskerville, an ICU doctor with Oregon Health & Science University who has been an expert witness for inmates suing the state, said that social distancing was virtually impossible in a prison setting.

"You can limit how many people sit at tables, and put dots on the floor for the med line, but a lot of this is in a kind of dormitory setting where you can reach your arm out and touch your bunkmate," he said.

But Herivel said that at SRCI, there had been more chance than at other prisons for social distancing because it is a newer, larger facility. She said that the 13 COVID deaths that have occurred there seemed especially tragic given that context.

"They could've prevented the outbreak and the deaths more easily than other facilities. It was not just hesitancy, but refusal to comply to a lot of these standards that ended in completely preventable deaths," she said.

"The overarching theme was that a lot of what they were doing was haphazard and inconsistent at times," said Baskerville. "The virus is going to exploit any weak link in your system."

Because of its relatively advanced medical infrastructure, SRCI has become the receiving facility for prisoners with COVID across Oregon. Yet, as at other institu-

tions in the Oregon Department of Corrections, prisoners who report COVID symptoms are isolated in the Disciplinary Segregation Unit, otherwise known as "the hole."

The threat of being sent to the hole created what Baskerville called "a conspiracy of silence."

"The inmates don't want to tell anyone that they've got a cough or they have symptoms of COVID because they essentially get punished for it," Baskerville said. "Having talked to a lot of inmates, it's like, 'Listen, I'd rather just take my chances than be sent to the hole for 14 days. If I told them I have the symptoms of COVID, I would be treated the same way as if I punched a guard.'"

The judge in the SRCI case was persuaded by testimony that that was the case.

"Plaintiff and defense evidence established that AICs hide symptoms to avoid placement in the (hole) and that some AICs threaten others against reporting symptoms of illness," according to the ruling.

The ruling questioned the reliability of the medical care given at SRCI.

The prison's chief medical officer, Dr. Garth Gulick, testified under oath "that he did not believe that fever was an indication of COVID-19 infection." That contradicts guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on management of COVID in detention settings.

Gulick also testified that he believed that COVID testing was "harmful" and said that it "can be the enemy," again despite CDC guidance showing otherwise.

"Dr. Gulick's opinions on fever as a symptom of COVID-19 and the efficacy of testing at stopping the spread of the virus undermines the

reliability of his medical opinion on the many relevant questions of fact related to this topic," according to the ruling.

Black said that the agency disagrees with the judge's findings regarding Gulick.

"Dr. Gulick and his team have not only provided frontline COVID-19 care to all adults in custody (AICs) in Eastern Oregon since the beginning of the pandemic, but have also taken extraordinary measures to ensure continuity of care for non-COVID-19 medical conditions," said Black. "SRCI will continue to rely on Dr. Gulick for his extensive medical training, knowledge, and expertise."

The agency's top chief medical officer, Dr. Warren Roberts, also came under attack this year in a January habeas corpus case in which Marion County Circuit Judge Claudia Burton highlighted Roberts' history of malpractice. Roberts was the subject of a formal complaint by the Oregon Board of Medical Examiners, and was at one point ordered to stop performing surgeries.

"Dr. Roberts' technical competence as a physician is at least questionable," the judge wrote. "I agree with plaintiff that Dr. Roberts is an unreliable witness who lacks credibility."

Baskerville said that during COVID, it is particularly egregious how medical staff at the Oregon Department of Corrections has forced medically vulnerable prisoners to ration albuterol inhalers, used to treat asthma and other lung conditions.

Even during the pandemic, inmates have been prescribed inhalers that cannot be refilled as often as medically needed, forcing them to either use the inhaler less than is necessary or risk running out. This issue came up in the court ruling,

and according to Baskerville, it is widespread.

"The worst case scenario is using their cellmate's inhaler if they're low or running out," said Baskerville. "That's probably the worst way to spread (COVID)."

Baskerville, Herivel, and Edwards also concurred that Oregon prisons regularly ignore common hygiene practices like handwashing in their design.

Edwards said the inmates frequently don't have access to soap and even then "they don't have anything to dry their hands on, so they dry them on toilet paper, or on their dirty clothes."

Then there is the vaccine. The Oregon Department of Corrections estimated that 45% percent of staff would refuse the vaccine, and incomplete available figures show the actual vaccination rate as closer to 35%, according to reporting by the Willamette Week. On the other hand, 69% of inmates have accepted the vaccine since one lawsuit in February resulted in making it available immediately to all inmates.

Herivel said the government was remarkably inefficient by engaging in costly litigation to fend off claims of improper care that in some instances were subsequently proven founded.

"I think it's extraordinary that we have had to use these singular cases and also this class-action case to get our prison systems to take minimally basic protective steps which, from what we hear from our reports, really haven't been effectuated to date," she said.

Edwards echoed that. "All they're asking for is for the facilities to adhere to CDC guidelines," she said. "It's shocking to me that (inmates) have to go to court to achieve that."

ARREST

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Colton wrote that after he arrived at the property about 9:43 p.m., he tried to talk to Crews, and "a struggle ensued"

between the two. Colton wrote that he "drove (Crews) backwards to the couch and ultimately onto the floor where he was placed in handcuffs."

Colton wrote that he later talked to Crews' mother, Paula,

and father, Bill, and to another man, Johnny Scott Weldon, who told Colton that he also had an altercation with William Crews.

Paula Crews told Colton that prior to police arriving, her son had wrapped his arms around

her and secured her wrists, and that she had fallen down with her son landing on her. She also told Colton that William Crews had dragged her through the house by her arm and her hair.

According to Colton's report,

Bill Crews and Weldon tried to help Paula Crews, and both had a physical altercation with William Crews.

Colton wrote that when he arrived at the jail, Crews tried to run away from him and from

Cpl. Dennis Lefever, and then "resisted the entire way to the cell."

Lefever sustained an injury to the big toe on his left foot that caused minor bleeding, according to Colton's report.

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