

OUT OF THE BLUE: Colony targeted by animal rights activists

Protesters weren't part of an existing group and had no issue with the Jumbo Valley colony — other than it raises poultry



This video posted on YouTube shows animal activists entering a turkey barn at the Jumbo Valley Hutterite Colony on Labour Day. The protesters, who had been dropped off by buses, arrived early in the morning before workers from the colony were on site. PHOTO: FROM YOUTUBE VIDEO

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AF STAFF

On Labour Day, members of the Jumbo Valley Hutterite Colony near Fort MacLeod opened their turkey barn to a scene that no farmer would want to see — their barn was filled with about three dozen animal rights activists.

“They just showed up and walked right in,” said Frankie Hofer, manager of the colony’s poultry operations and feed mill. “The guy that lives here, he’s getting his house remodelled so he was in a different place. It was just like a normal day when you go to work. They were inside the barn when we arrived.”

The first person on site in the morning noticed some people along the highway, but didn’t think anything of it.

But the people inside the barn definitely made an impression. Wearing disposable coveralls, booties, gloves, and filter masks along with matching T-shirts, they sat lined up against the walls, filming, taking pictures, and live-streaming video footage to Instagram and Facebook.

The occupied turkey barn, containing about 4,000 birds, is one of eight free-range barns on the site — which means the birds are free to go outside into an enclosed area when the weather is warm enough and can access water and food when they want to.

The animal activists weren’t part of a spe-

cific group but instead organized themselves via word of mouth to conduct what they call a “Liberation Lockdown.” Similar protests have been staged in Ontario and B.C., but not in Alberta before.

Hofer and the other members of the colony were concerned about both the illegal break and entry and biosecurity.

“We don’t know where these people were before they showed up. They just walked into one of our barns,” said Hofer.

“This is private property. We have big signs that say ‘Do Not Enter — Private Property.’ Even if they would have come through the main road, they would have seen the sign.

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“But that doesn’t mean anything. They jumped through the fence on the highway.”

No name, no leader

Kennadi Herbert, an animal rights activist from Pincher Creek, said the ad hoc group of people decided to stage a protest in Alberta after a similar protest in April at Excelsior Hog Farm in Abbotsford, B.C. In that incident, about 50 people entered a hog barn, while more than 100 others stood outside waving signs and chanting slogans. Herbert said she was part of that protest along with Sarah Barnes, another activist who also participated in the Jumbo Valley demonstration.

“(Excelsior) was our first huge act of civil disobedience and so right away, we wanted to plan something new,” said Herbert, who said she has been involved in the animal rights movement for about a year.

The group doesn’t have an official name or leader, she said. Instead, it was organized by word of mouth, with people calling others they knew and trusted to participate, she said. Activists came from Edmonton, Calgary, the Bow Valley area, B.C., Saskatchewan, Ontario, New York, the UK, and Australia said Herbert.

The protesters, who ranged in age from seven to about 60, got school buses to drop them off, and many lined the road, holding signs calling for an end to animal agriculture. They chose the Jumbo Valley Hutterite Colony farm because of its location, and because they wanted to do an action involving turkeys. Other recent world animal liberation actions have involved dairy and pork, and the activists wanted to raise awareness about the treatment of poultry,

“The idea behind the action was to bring awareness to factory farming and animal agriculture,” said Herbert. “We’re vegan. We just want transparency into everything. A lot of people don’t want to see their food as the individuals



About three dozen animal activists trespassed and illegally entered the barn at the Jumbo Valley Hutterite Colony near Fort MacLeod on Sept. 2 in what they called a “Liberation Lockdown.” PHOTO: SUPPLIED

they are. We were just wanting to show that.”

Herbert was part of the inside team and said she was the one who called the police. The outside team, which lined the highways, was made up of about 50 people who wanted to bring attention to animal rights and support the inside protesters, but who didn’t want to trespass or involve themselves in illegal activity.

“We wanted to make sure it got as much attention as possible,” said Barnes. “We were banking on more highway traffic.”

Social media was key to their publicity strategy but the activists also wanted mainstream media attention and their protest drew TV crews from Calgary.

Herbert said when she called 911 and asked for police to come down and mediate the “negotia-

tions” with colony officials, the 911 operator laughed.

“The dispatcher said, ‘If you’re in there illegally, the RCMP won’t be defending you guys.’”

Turkey ‘liberation’

The RCMP had arrived by the time Hofer got on site.

“We talked to the RCMP and they communicated with them,” said Hofer. “We just wanted them to leave, and (for the police) to take them out of our barns. But then the RCMP decided they didn’t want to get violent, so they wanted there to be a different way of going about this.”

The activists asked to go through all eight of the turkey barns, for the media to have access so they could film the protest, and to “liberate” five turkeys, who would live out their lives in an animal sanctuary.

Hofer said the farmers had nothing to hide, so they allowed the media to come onto the property. However, since it was a holiday, it took longer for the media crews to arrive.

“I don’t know if we did the right thing or not, but that’s what happened. So then they looked in every barn,” said Hofer.

Barnes, Herbert, and another activist named Max Mah, who is affiliated with an animal rights group called “Direct Action” joined the media on their tour.

The activists claim they saw birds with tumours, twisted legs, infections and an inability to walk.

However, Cara Prout, executive director of Alberta Turkey Producers, said the Jumbo Valley Colony’s operation is not considered to have welfare problems.

“We don’t believe this farm was targeted on account of animal care concerns,” said Prout. “We believe it was targeted solely because the individuals that trespassed do not agree with raising livestock for consumption.”

After being allowed to take five turkeys, the activists left the site after about five hours. The RCMP is conducting an investigation, and are considering laying charges. The colony has been urged by many farmers to press charges.

More protests ahead?

Alberta Turkey Producers has been in communication with the Jumbo Valley Colony and other turkey producers since the incident.

“What we’re doing at this point in time, is we’re encouraging producers to be vigilant of their security practices, and to take extra security measures,” said Prout. “Make sure they have locks on their barns, they have gates up, they are reporting suspicious activity.”

Many livestock organizations are considering ways to deal with animal activists who trespass, said Annemarie Pedersen, executive director for Alberta Farm Animal Care.

“AFAC’s perspective on this is that if you feel you want to do something for the benefit of the animals, the last thing you should do is be walking into a facility without understanding what you are walking into,” said Pedersen, adding the issue is on the agenda for the organization’s Livestock Care Conference in March.

“A lot of these animals are very calm, and they are in an environment that keeps them happy and calm, and when random peo-

ple charge in, that changes that dynamic. From our perspective, that is not animal welfare.”

It’s also a criminal offence, she added.

“That’s not even talking about the biosecurity issues we have right now, and how critical it is to keep bacteria or illnesses out. African swine fever is top of my mind when I talk about this.”

Neither her organization nor the SPCA has been involved with Jumbo Valley turkey operation, she said.

“The barn they went into had no animal welfare issues,” said Pedersen. “The birds were taken care of according to the fairly strict standards that Alberta Turkey has in place for their producers.”

“(The protesters) are not in there about animal welfare. They’re in there to get meat off the table.”

“We’re about animal rights. Animals deserve the right to be free. Even if a farm treats animals well, at the end of the day, they get sent to slaughter.”

SARAH BARNES

Barnes confirmed this.

“We’re not advocating for better conditions or a better way of doing the wrong thing,” she said.

“We’re about animal rights. Animals deserve the right to be free. Even if a farm treats animals well, at the end of the day, they get sent to slaughter.”

“We’re not for animal welfare, we’re definitely animal rights, and will try to make sure these animals don’t need to be slaughtered.”

Herbert said that the “Liberation Lockdown” was deemed a success by the activists, and more protests like this one are being planned all over the world, which could include Alberta.

“Whether there are more actions that I am involved in, or more actions around the world, there will definitely be more civil disobedience in the animal rights movement,” she said.

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