

# Farmers urged to watch out for animal activists

## Coalition to Support Iowa's Farmers receives complaints each year

Iowa Farmers are being urged to watch out for animal activists. (npr.org)

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Those familiar with the tactics of hard-core animal rights activists suggest farmers with livestock plan for potential trouble, accepting that isolation in rural Iowa does not provide total protection. In fact, remote locations work in favor of extremists bent on criminal mischief or worse. So-called “direct actions” — opening cages at fur farms, gluing locks at butcher shops and setting fires — reached Iowa in the 1970s and ’80s, according to Mark Kitsmiller, an FBI agent assigned to the Joint Terrorism Task Force in Cedar Rapids. And since then, sporadic incidents have been reported.

A more recent incident happened in October 2011 at the Circle K Fur Farm in Woodbury County. Although no animals got loose, law enforcement officials arrested Kellie Van Orden and her husband, Victor, after they tripped alarms. Both accepted plea deals last year. Kellie Van Orden pleaded guilty to releasing an animal from an animal facility, a felony, and to third-degree attempted burglary, an aggravated misdemeanor. She will be on probation for five years, according to court records. For the same charges, Victor Van Orden was sentenced to five years in prison.

The Fur Commission USA, which represents mink farmers, commented on Kellie Van Orden’s situation. “Once again, the extremists of the animal rights movement have incited another young person to pay the price for their misguided campaigns against our country’s farming community,” the organization said at the time.

Peter Young, an unofficial spokesman for the Animal Liberation Front, also shared thoughts on the couple’s crime.

“This is the second time there was an action at the Circle K Fur Farm,” Young wrote in 2012. “The first occurred in 1997 when 5,000 mink and 10 foxes were released.” Young, a convicted felon, did not mention in his post that the FBI considered him a suspect in that crime along with an associate, Justin Samuel. They were later charged and convicted in Wisconsin for similar acts during that same time frame.

Mink farmers maintain a high level of awareness, share information and, as Circle K owners apparently did, install security measures. Hog, cattle and poultry producers are starting to catch up, according to Brian Waddingham. He is executive director of the Coalition to Support Iowa’s Farmers. The organization is comprised of seven separate groups but includes Iowa’s beef, pork, turkey and dairy associations. On its website, [www.supportfarmers.com](http://www.supportfarmers.com), the organization advises producers to avoid complacency and to think ahead.

“Every year, the Coalition to Support Iowa’s Farmers receives numerous reports of livestock theft and/or vandalism. It is important for every farmer to stop and take time to think about the security measures they have — or don’t have — in place,” according to the organization. “The coalition and law enforcement officials encourage farmers to be proactive and take steps to better protect their farm and livestock, even if they are not aware of any criminal activity in their neighborhood.”

Waddingham suggests other tips for producers:

- Install motion-activated lights around buildings.
- Install video cameras that also react to movement. Place two if possible, one to capture license plates, another higher to record faces and vehicles.
- Develop good relationships with neighbors, sharing information about vacations and suspicious vehicles.
- Vary routines.

“Don’t show up at your hog or turkey operation every day at 8 o’clock,” Waddingham said. “Stop in at different times of the day.”

Kitsmiller also advises rural residents to contact law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, when they see something out of the ordinary. “I’d rather have people call and have it turn out to be nothing,” he said.

Waddingham sounds a similar note but adds a word of caution. "If you see lights in the middle of the night, call the sheriff. Don't try to get in the middle of anything," he said.

Waddingham and Kitsmiller both report little change in the frequency of such "direct actions" in Iowa. "I haven't seen any trends. From what I see and hear, I don't think it's getting any worse," Waddingham said. "That's why I was kind of shocked by the Butter Cow (vandalism incident where the "Butter Cow" display had paint poured on it and was painted with the words "Freedom for All" at the 2013 Iowa State Fair). Maybe that's some indication they are ramping up again."

Kitsmiller puts some faith in Iowans' attitudes, who — if online comments are any indication — overwhelmingly rejected the attack on the Butter Cow. "Some of the people here that would subscribe to their ideas maybe think there are other ways to share their views rather than physical damage," Kitsmiller said. He also wonders about the movement's objectives. "I've always questioned when they release these animals, you get a number run over by cars or eaten by predators," he said. "So I'm not sure what the difference is. But that's just me."

- *Dennis Magee is regional editor of the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier, another Lee Enterprises newspaper.*