

Idaho Governor Signs Bill Banning Dairy Spying

JOHN MILLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter signed a bill Friday that imposes jail time and fines against people who [secretly film animal abuse at Idaho's agricultural facilities](#) [1].

Otter inked the new law swiftly, just two days after it cleared its final legislative hurdle in the House.

The bill came in response to videos released by Los Angeles-based vegetarian and animal rights group [Mercy for Animals](#) [2] showing workers at Bettencourt Dairy beating, stomping, dragging and sexually abusing cows in 2012.

Idaho's \$2.5 billion dairy industry complained the group used its videos not to curb abuse, but to unfairly hurt Bettencourt's business. Bettencourt operates dairies at numerous locations that include more than 60,000 cows and is one of the largest dairy companies in the U.S.

Otter, a rancher, said the measure will help make agriculture producers more secure in their property and their livelihood.

"My signature today reflects my confidence in their desire to responsibly act in the best interest of the animals on which that livelihood depends," Otter wrote in a statement. "No animals rights organization cares more or has more at stake than Idaho farmers and ranchers do in ensuring that their animals are healthy, well-treated and productive."

Utah, Idaho's neighbor to the south, has a similar law. It's being challenged in federal court on grounds that, among other things, it infringes upon activists' free speech rights to expose cruelty.

Under Idaho's measure that was branded by its foes as an "ag gag bill," people caught surreptitiously filming agricultural operations face up to a year in jail and a \$5,000 fine.

It prohibits making audio or video recordings of such operations without first getting permission, and criminalizes obtaining records from agricultural operations by force or misrepresentation. Lying on an employment application for such a farm is also outlawed.

In the Legislature, Democrats opposed the bill on grounds that it makes Idaho's agriculture industry seem like it's hiding something.

Mercy For Animals immediately decried Otter's signature Friday, saying that it transforms Idaho into "a safe haven for animal abuse."

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"Gov. Otter has failed Idaho and the American people," said the group's executive director, Nathan Runkle. "By signing this bill into law, he has sided with those who seek to keep Idaho's corrupt factory farming practices hidden from public view and created a safe haven for animal abuse and other criminal activity in the state."

Bob Naerebout, who heads the Idaho Dairymen's Association that promoted the measure, said Runkle has it wrong.

Naerebout contends Mercy For Animals unfairly sought to persuade Bettencourt's customers to stop buying its milk products — even after the farm's owner, Luis Bettencourt, fired five workers filmed mistreating cows and cooperated with their prosecution.

"The purpose of the bill was not to hide anything, the purpose of the bill was to address those who get on agriculture operations under false pretenses, with a predetermination to cause injury and economic harm," Naerebout said. "The dairy producers of Idaho — and dairy producers across this nation — take extremely good care of their cattle."

In the wake of the abuse, the University of Idaho Extension, along with the College of Southern Idaho, worked with the dairy industry to offer a program to help teach dairy workers about proper animal care, milking, calf raising and feeding dairy animals.

At least one of the Bettencourt workers pictured in the Mercy For Animals video pleaded guilty to misdemeanor animal cruelty and spent time in jail.

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[1] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/02/disputed-%E2%80%98ag-gag%E2%80%99-bill-advances-idaho>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/mercyforanimals>