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## Ranchers lose livestock to killer free-roaming dogs; Bucks, does and unborn kids are victims



**Richard Essek and Leslie Essek at the Lazycat Farm in Gilchrist County on Wednesday (Nov. 8).**

### Story and Photos

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Nov. 10, 2017 at 3:47 p.m.**

**GILCHRIST COUNTY** – The day after a rabbit and chicken farmer in Gilchrist County lost her animals to a pit bull and a German Shepherd (Saturday, Nov. 4), a goat rancher in the Bell area had three goats killed and two maimed by canines.

Below the two stacks of limbs are graves of two doe that died early Sunday morning after dogs attacked them.





**The body of the third doe is seen here. She died after suffering for a time after the dog attack on Sunday.**

Richard Esseck, 78, and his wife Leslie Esseck, 68, have owned Lazycat Farm for 16 years now, having started that agricultural entity in 2001, after he retired from his job at Citrus Memorial Hospital at the age of 62.

On Sunday (Nov. 5), the couple was awakened by the screams of goats being attacked by dogs. Esseck went out with a pistol and a shotgun,

having lost goats twice before during the previous two consecutive years to attacking dogs.

This time, he may have winged one of the killer dogs, he said, because he saw it jump. As best as he could tell at either 4 a.m. or 3 in the morning -- because that was daylight saving time fall-back Sunday, the attacking animal he may have wounded was a pit bulldog.

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**The buck seen here has lost his left ear, the vision in his left eye and his left rear leg is injured. Richard Esseck is seen with this injured animal on Wednesday.**

As a result of this attack by the killer dogs, Esseck lost three pregnant female goats to death, and two bucks were so severely injured

they may not be able to breed in the future. The killer dogs killed unborn kids that were in the wombs of the three doe as well.

One doe, as it was in its death throes, Esseck said, tried unsuccessfully to give birth to its kid.

One of the surviving bucks lost its left ear, the use of its left eye and its left rear leg became so crippled that it was to the point where it could not put that foot on the ground, as it was seen limping Wednesday (Nov. 8).

One buck on Wednesday huddled under a shed next to a wall, traumatized from the attack. The other wounded buck limped to the far end of the property next to a fence after a visitor arrived.

Esseck said both bucks previously would approach and greet visitors to the Lazycat Farm.

Both wounded bucks were visibly limping on their left hind legs.

Esseck said the bucks need both hind legs to procreate with a doe.

This attack by the dogs that were allowed to run free by a negligent dog owner is devastating to Esseck. The goat farmer sees this loss as setting his project for improving his meat goat breed back by as much as five years.

He has been using a process to create a better breed of meat goat that is more resistant to worms, and eats more efficiently to produce more meat for less money.

## **REDUCING THE PROBLEM**

Esseck has a suggestion that he intends to share with Gilchrist County Manager Bobby Crosby after the Economic Development Committee meeting on Monday (Nov. 13). Esseck sits as a member of the Gilchrist County Economic Development Committee.

He will suggest to Crosby that the county manager approach the County Commission and have the county attorney draft amendments to the ordinances in regard to dogs.

Animal control officers in Gilchrist County need to have more tools available for their use, Esseck said.



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Some people see no problem with a dog attacking a cat, another dog, a chicken or a rabbit, Esseck said. That dog can bite, maim or kill those smaller animals and there is no consequence to the owner.

“There is apathy when it comes to animal control,” he said.

The ordinances need to be revised, he added.

Goats and cattle, Esseck said, are ear-tagged from birth to death to show who owns them. This allows for the Florida Department of Agriculture, the Florida Department of Health or state, county or local law enforcement agencies to backtrack in the event that is needed, Esseck said.

He believes that Gilchrist County could adopt a local ordinance to require dogs to wear collars with a metal ID tag to backtrack and find the owner of the dog in the event that is needed.

For instance, he said, if he had shot and killed one of the attacking dogs Sunday morning, then that dog could be tracked back to its owner who could then be cited for violating the ordinance that requires dogs to not roam free.

Esseck could recover lost revenue through a civil court’s ruling in regard to damages for his losses.

He sells animals for \$180 to \$185. However, the loss of the bucks’ abilities to breed and the loss of the does’ ability to create kids can be extrapolated to reflect a \$50,000 loss over the years when those animals would have produced livestock – goats, and goat meat, he said.

The revised ordinance would show that any dog leaving its owner’s property is in violation of the county law, he said.

All animals should be contained by fencing or on a leash. The idea of having 10 acres with no fence is not adequate, he said.

“If it bites anything on somebody else’s property,” Esseck said, “it should be considered a dangerous animal.”

Esseck said that a dog that bites a cat, a chicken, a rabbit, a goat, a cow or any other pet or livestock must be considered as a dangerous dog. Right now, unless a dog bites a human it can kill as many times as it wants with no criminal repercussion to the negligent owner who lets it roam free and kill at will.

“A chicken being torn apart,” he said, “hurts as much as a cow being torn apart of a person being torn apart. A bite is a bite. They should all be treated with the same consideration.”

Esseck said it is his belief that an offending killer dog owner should not be allowed to settle out of court either.

In the instance of the rabbits and chickens killed the day before his goats were maimed and killed, that rabbit-killing, chicken-killing dog owner was located by the Gilchrist County Sheriff’s Office and Gilchrist County Animal Control.

The rabbit and chicken rancher accepted payment in lieu of going to civil court, Esseck said.

“I think a report needs to be created,” he said, “and a dog bite needs to be treated as such. The dog needs to be held and reviewed for rabies or whatever, and there should be a citation issued -- period.”

Esseck said the owner of that set of killer dogs may have first denied it could be his dogs.

“This dog kills chickens and rabbits,” Esseck said. “Did this dog take a shower before

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he went home? He had to have blood on him. The owner had to know something happened to that dog -- instead of 'Oh, what happened?' That's what really gets me."

Esseck added that he is not proposing the collection of every loose dog to for their owners to be cited. Dogs jump fences, dig under fences, and run out of open gates and the like.

"Things happen," he said. "So you catch the dog that is running loose. You bring it to the pound and do the normal procedure for that.

"But if that animal is caught in a situation where there is injury or death," Esseck added, "then it should be treated as a dangerous animal. This is a different category than a dog escaping from his owner."

## **BACKGROUND IN GOAT FARMING**

Esseck said that his wife Leslie's father Manuel Berdion, when he lived in Spain, raised goats.

After Esseck retired from Citrus Memorial at the age of 62, he bought 20 acres in northern Gilchrist County. His grandparents -- Antonio and Vincinzia Barone -- had a chicken farm in New Jersey.

After having the property, he learned as much as he could about meat goat farming. He saw this as a supplemental income producer.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Esseck also became Master Gardeners, learning from Levy County Extension Agent Anthony Drew about plants. As a result, they went further and earned a nursery growers' permit to buy and sell plants, which the couple does on occasion as well for income.

Esseck said he thinks Drew is "... the best guy in the world."

This is part of what Esseck said he has done to create a sustainable lifestyle.

His background over the past decade and a half includes being a past president of the Florida Meat Goat Association. Esseck also served as a Meat Goat Competition Judge at the Suwannee River Fair for three years at the pavilion located in the City of Fanning Springs.

He has participated in the Goat and Sheep Scrapie Free Flock Certification Program by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Fresh From Florida, the branded part of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, sent a writer and photographer to Lazycat Farm in the past, too, to show in its magazine how this small ranch is used to produce fresh goat meat.

And there has been an article published about this meat goat farming couple published in the Florida Farm Bureau magazine, he said.

Through selective breeding over 16 years, his meat goats now are almost parasite resistant. He heartily deworms the animals.

"My animals thrive on forage," he said. "I do not spend a lot of money on food. They are easy kidders. I don't have to be losing does because they can't have their kids.

"They take care of their kids," Esseck continued, "which in the long run, makes it more economical for me to raise the goat because it costs me less."

As a result of the most recent killer dog attack, Esseck said, his breeding program is set back by as much as five years. Before the attack, he had 18 goats. After the attack, there were 15, with two of the bucks not able to procreate.