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Farmer avoids jail for deaths of 8 cattle

A judge determines that William Lee Shelton did not intentionally cause the animals' deaths.

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SUFFOLK

A man battling cancer was spared jail time for letting cattle starve to death on his farm.

Farmer William Lee Shelton, who faced eight counts of animal cruelty, was found guilty of three counts Tuesday in Suffolk General District Court.

On Dec. 26, Shelton, a 64-year-old Suffolk resident, was detained in New York, where he was seeking treatment for cancer.

Animal Control officers had been called to his Ashburn Road farm. There, they found six cattle on the ground. Four were dead. The two others were euthanized when a veterinarian arrived.

A seventh animal, a calf, was also euthanized at the recommendation of a Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services staff veterinarian on the scene.

The calf was unable to get up. It was skinny as a rail, its eyes sunken in, said Daniel Kovich, the state Department of Agriculture veterinarian.

Officers also found an eighth dead cow. Its carcass was already decomposing, Animal Control Officer Meghann Chapin testified.

The rest of the cattle in the field, about 60, were "very thin to emaciated," Kovich said.

Department of Agriculture veterinarian Karl Magura performed necropsies on two of the carcasses.

One of them was devoid of body fat. Even its bone marrow had a fat content of 1.4 percent. For a cow, 60 percent is low, Magura said.

"This cow's bone marrow fat is the lowest I've ever seen," he said.

Witnesses for Shelton testified they often saw bales of hay out in the pasture. When he was out of town, his employees were instructed to feed the cattle, Shelton testified. Shelton's veterinarian said it's possible the hay was deficient in the nutrients the cattle needed.

At the end of the trial, which lasted more than three hours, Judge William R. Savage III determined Shelton did not intentionally cause the cattle's deaths.

Shelton has been in the livestock business for years, and there's been "no shred of evidence" of past neglect, Savage said.

What changed that is Shelton's health problems, the judge said. But Shelton is still responsible for providing for his cattle.

"I think the evidence is overwhelming those animals died of starvation," Savage said.

Savage suspended a 30-day sentence and ordered Shelton to pay a \$750 fine and reimburse veterinary and other expenses related to the case.

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