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# Suffolk farmer found guilty of animal cruelty

## SUFFOLK

A farmer with decades of experience had never neglected his animals until he became seriously ill, a General District Court judge decided late Tuesday.

Judge William R. Savage III found William L. Shelton guilty on three charges of animal cruelty, but suspended a \$250 fine and 10-day jail sentence on each conviction. Shelton must pay restitution of \$1,000 for hauling two dead cows out of his field near Buckhorn and for the necropsy on the animals.

Savage dismissed five additional animal cruelty charges and placed Shelton on probation for two years.

The charges were lodged the day after Christmas, when an animal control officer found several cows dead in a field near Shelton's home. Two vets who testified during the lengthy trial said Shelton's animals died of starvation. A healthy cow has about 60 percent bone marrow fat, said Dr. Daniel Kovich, a veterinarian with the Virginia Department of Agriculture. Shelton's cow had about 1.4 percent bone marrow fat.

"They were in very thin condition," Kovich said. "There was no visible fat, dry mucous membranes. The calves were uniformly thin. There was no nursing activity. They were dull, listless, malnourished."

"We listed the cause of death as malnutrition," said Dr. Karl Magura, who performed the necropsies. "In my professional opinion, the cows starved."

Shelton disagreed. Before he left to go to New York for cancer treatment, he said he made arrangements for someone to feed the animals three 1,000-pound bales of hay per day. Several of his neighbors testified that they saw the animals being fed, and they saw hay in the field.

The hay, said Dr. John Sangenario Jr., a vet who testified for the defense, might have had a magnesium deficiency, and that might have prevented the animals from digesting the food and from eating as much as they needed to gain and maintain weight.

Prosecutor Susan Walton asked for jail time for Shelton. Defense attorney Justin Bush said his client didn't kill the animals intentionally.

"A livestock farmer doesn't pick up the phone and call a vet every time an animal gets sick," Savage said. "I do not think this defendant caused the death of his cows. He had some serious medical problems that caused him to be out of town."

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