

Telling their side

Animal Welfare



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Nezih Sabankaya said many of the seized animals had recently arrived at the ranch in order to be nursed back to health.

Horse owners accuse SPCA

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BONNY DOON — The owners of a herd of Arabian horses confiscated last month by state and local humane officers accused the SPCA Friday of "dragging our names through the mud" and carrying off a group of neglected horses that were being nursed back to health.

They also charged the SPCA with injuring some of the horses during a wild roundup before taking them away.

"The Sabankaya family has been forced to quietly bear this great public humiliation ... so as not to jeopardize negotiations with the District Attorney's office," said lawyer Gordon Salis-

'For them, this ... is like being accused of abusing their children.'

— Gordon Salisbury, lawyer for Sabankayas

bury, who represents horse breeders Mustafa, Nezih and Semih Sabankaya.

State and local humane officers descended on the Sabankaya ranch Oct. 30 following a three-month investigation and seized 44 horses, claiming that some of the horses appeared malnourished and ill. The investigation was sparked by a call from a neighbor, who complained of seeing skinny horses on the Saban-

kaya ranch.

Animal neglect charges were filed earlier this week by the DA's office.

Twenty of the confiscated horses were returned to the Sabankayas this week after an agreement with the DA's office was reached.

The brothers opened the gates of their ranch to a horde of reporters Friday morning. The 800-plus acre ranch is home to about

200 horses.

Dozens of elegant, arrogant, pampered Arabian horses frolicked around the corrals, or poked their noses curiously through their stall doors. A number of the horses are worth \$50,000 to \$200,000 apiece, and others are "priceless," Mustafa Sabankaya said "because we would never sell them."

"You can see with your own eyes that this family is dedicated to breeding, raising and caring for horses," Salisbury said. "For them, this ... is like being accused of abusing their children."

Sabankaya caressed the finely-chiseled face of a stallion named SS Miami Vice, and said the horse was moved indoors only

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two days before the SPCA raid, and narrowly missed being "abducted."

"This horse could be worth a million dollars someday," he said, planting a kiss on the animal's nose. "This is a real Arabian horse, the prettiest of all creatures."

At the time of the raid a month ago, SPCA officials said 20 of the horses were healthy, but were taken for evaluation because they were running in the same pasture as the skinny horses. Mustafa Sabankaya said Friday he was required to pay \$5,000 to secure the release of the healthy horses.

One of the healthy horses belongs to Gwendolyn Beaugard, a neighbor of the Sabankayas, who was outraged that her horse was taken for a month.

"My 3-year old was kept in the pasture because he's not old enough to ride right now," Beaugard said. "He was in a magnificent field with all kinds of room to run, and they took him away and stuck him in a little paddock. They glued a tag to his neck and it pulled his hair out, and he lost about 60 pounds while he was there. He doesn't look as good as he did."

The Sabankayas say most of the skinny horses belong to an Arizo-

na surgeon who sent the neglected herd to Bonny Doon to be nursed back to health. The Arizona horses had been on the ranch for two months before they were confiscated, Salisbury said. He said the horses were thin but healthy, and he said he has two veterinarians to support his claims.

The owner of the horses will be a key witness at a preliminary hearing on the case, which is scheduled for Tuesday, Salisbury said.

Assistant District Attorney Kristen Long refused to comment on the case Friday except to say "we don't file criminal charges unless we feel we have a case." The charges of animal cruelty and neglect are misdemeanor charges, she said.

Salisbury also charged humane officers with injuring several of the horses as they rounded up and tranquilized the animals. He said some of the young, unbroken horses were slashed when they panicked and ran into the fences.

SPCA spokeswoman Judy Cassada said she only saw one horse get cut during the roundup, and said the wound was treated "immediately." She agreed that most of the Sabankaya horses are well-treated, but said the horses now in custody of the SPCA are "definitely very malnourished."