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Stolen cattle, other property recovered

By Rick Harmon

Tracking down cattle rustlers led law enforcement officials to more than half a million dollars in stolen property, from cattle to trailers, tractors and backhoes, and it led them to everything from crack dealers to moonshiners, said Ron Sparks, Alabama commissioner of Agriculture and Industries.

And he said the investigation is a long way from being over.

Sparks said the longtime undercover operation that was carried out in Macon, Montgomery, Lowndes, Russell and Butler counties began with stolen all-terrain vehicles and then stolen cattle, and just kept growing.

"Things just start clicking," he said Tuesday. "Soon it seemed every time we turned around, we'd end up with something else. It would be moonshine, then an ATV, then marijuana or crack. The more we'd dig, the more we found."

Part of what the investigation found was cattle, about 80 head of cattle and another 17 or 18 calves. The investigators used some new methods to solve the old-fashioned crime. They arrested some of the suspected cattle rustlers by doing DNA testing on the calves at the State Diagnostic Lab in Auburn.

"I don't believe it's ever been done in Alabama before," Sparks said. "We took a sample of one of the animals and were able to trace it back to the farm it was from. If not for the DNA testing, we would not have been able to build the case we were able to build, since they had no markings."

Sparks admits that the cattle rustling was a major motivation behind his department vigorously pursuing the investigation along with state and local law enforcement.

"You know we came out a few months ago, when we first heard about the cattle rustling, and we told the people that that was a big mistake -- don't go there -- because if you do, we are coming after you," he said.

"Apparently they didn't believe us."

They should have. The investigation has already led to nine arrests, and Sparks said six more should happen soon.

He said he wouldn't be surprised if before it's all over, there were as many as 20 to 25 arrests.

"I expect it to last another year to be honest with you," Sparks said. "We aren't going to let up. Our investigators are going to continue. We were making more arrests as the press conference was going on to announce these.

"This isn't something where we are going to have a press conference and then stop to rest on our laurels."

He said a major reason for this is because there are a lot of people who can't afford to have the

investigation stop.

"Our farmers can't afford crime like this now," he said. "During times like these if you lose 16 or 17 head of cattle or lose your tractor, that can be the difference between whether you make it or not."

He said he was amazed by how well state and local law enforcement officials, which included ABC Enforcement, ABI and more than a dozen sheriff's and police departments, worked together on the investigation.

"There were no turf wars," he said. "Everyone had the same mission and the same goal, and I can tell you it worked."
