

Extensive Livestock Farming Killing Ecosystems and Laundering Drug Money: The Case of alias “Toto Ariza”

Summary: Through false vehicle license plates and altered health inspection documents, livestock companies such as Agropecuaria El Búfalo, alias “Toto Ariza”, a partner of well-known drug lord “Ñeñe Hernández”, legalized billions of pesos (millions of dollars) by pretending to export live cattle and meat, while ecosystems such as wetlands resulted heavily affected. This practice is mostly done to justify the increase in wealth and although the Prosecutor's Office has received information about these illegal moves for over a decade, “Toto” continues to pose freely as a cattle rancher with his buoyant business.

* Spanish version available [here](#)

Written by: Enrique Gamboa - Researcher Revista RAYA

Translated by: Carmen Capriles – Reacción Climática Bolivia

On November 4, 2020, Jhon Alexander Ariza Pineda, alias “Toto Ariza”, was once again mentioned by the press following his capture in Floridablanca (Santander) accused of money laundering through his livestock company Agropecuaria El Buffalo. Simultaneously, eleven other “livestock farmers” were arrested in different parts of Santander accused of the same crime: fake live exports of cattle and meat to justify their “increase in wealth” since at least 2008. Despite the bombast of the news, twelve days later the powerful men were released because the Prosecutor's Office was unable to prove the claim before a judge.

However, the judicial records of “Toto Ariza” and his associates have been linked to the world of drug trafficking; they are captured, and soon enough mysteriously, they are released, with their processes either archived or still in the Prosecutor's Office. An employee of “Toto Ariza” was convicted in 2017 for transporting 1 billion pesos in cash that neither he nor his boss were able to justify to the authorities. On the contrary, it was determined that this money was intended to pay a criminal gang associated with paramilitaries in Antioquia: “Los Pachelly.”

The axis of “Toto Ariza’s” operations is in the Santander province, specifically in the municipality of Sábana de Torres. It is located in the Magdalena region, which is 112 kilometers from Bucaramanga, the capital, where Ariza is recognized for being a cattle rancher owning vast areas of land, and who made his fortune by breeding and selling cattle and buffalo. The former gives its name to his livestock company: Agropecuaria El Búfalo (Agribusiness the Buffalo). A species that was introduced to the region of Santander at the end of the sixties during the boom of palm oil production for biodiesel. The buffalo quickly found its way to livestock farms. Suddenly, many farms were filled with this animal, representing a danger to local fauna and

flora, altering the ecosystems it inhabits and putting the subsistence of other animals such as the manatee at risk.

Like in the first part of the series of two investigations that RAYA carried out around livestock, animal welfare, and biodiversity, titled *"Deforestation and livestock: a paramilitary marriage in the Colombian Amazon"*, here too we find that this business has historically been used for money laundering to finance paramilitarism, at the expense of animal suffering during the long journeys in trucks to get to the slaughterhouse where the façade of legality is materialized.

Fake livestock exports

"Toto Ariza" together with his sister Yeddy Andrea Ariza Pineda founded Agropecuaria El Búfalo in 2008 with an initial capital of 450 million pesos, establishing its headquarters in the city of Bucaramanga in Santander. In the original documents of the Agropecuaria, it was explicit that one of the company's objectives was to represent abroad Colombian companies dedicated to the marketing and production of beef and buffalo meat as well as their derivatives. At the same time, offering transportation services for meat products using their own or third-party vehicles. About a decade later, Agropecuaria El Búfalo is a prosperous business with assets of 93,000 million pesos. Although the Attorney General's Office carried out investigations into the company, these were not exhaustive.

Their transactions use different ways for circumventing the control and surveillance of State authorities, which are often corrupt, according to the complaints from the Prosecutor's Office since 2016. One of these modalities, for example, is fictitious exports of live cattle and meat. These operations are carried out through the falsification of livestock mobilization guides, documents that require approval from the Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA in Spanish). These guides contain false information about the real number of buffaloes and cattle that are exported to countries such as Venezuela. Likewise, they falsify the health certificates of vaccination and the license plates of the vehicles in which they transport live cattle or meat, to prevent the Police or border control from inspecting the trucks, and to pretend that the information in the documents matches the reality, although that is not the case.

One of the official reports that RAYA Magazine found out about is from December 9, 2019. The extensive document warned of the collusion between ranchers with officials from the Prosecutor's Office, customs (DIAN), the Colombian Institute of Agriculture (ICA in Spanish), and the Ministry of Transportation, to allow the laundering of billions of pesos through fake exports of large quantities of livestock between 2004 and 2019. According to the complainant, "Toto Ariza" received vehicle registrations from officials of the Ministry of Transportation, illegally they assigned him license plates that were in use exclusively for the Bucaramanga Transit Secretariat and that could not be assigned nor manufactured. "These plates are included between the range XMA -000 to XMJ-999 assigned to that transit agency in January 1972." However, the opposite happened, they were assigned to the company from "Toto Ariza" and used for fake livestock exports.

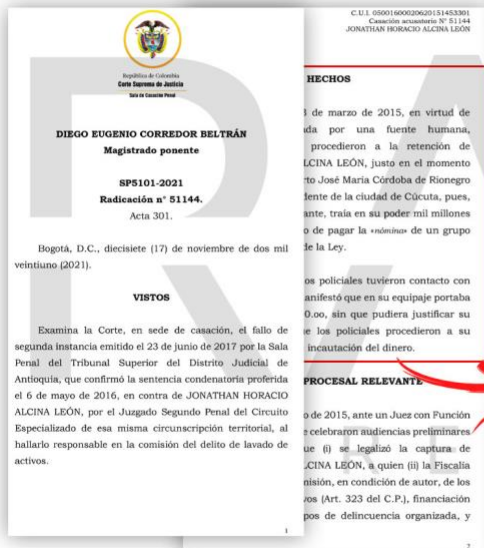
have no reports of fake exports of livestock by any of the monitoring entities in charge: customs (DIAN), the National Police, and the Tax and Customs Police (POLFA in Spanish).

The Ministry of Transportation guaranteed that the responsibility to provide information about the delivery of false license plates falls to the Superintendency of Transportation. This entity, in turn, said that POLFA was the one who should respond. We consulted POLFA, but their response was in line with the others: "The institution lacks competency regarding this request, taking into account that what is requested entails issues of merchandise exports (livestock) and that is the responsibility of customs (DIAN)." RAYA raised the query to this entity, the same task that POLFA did, but until the closing of this edition, we did not receive any response.

Cash and paramilitaries

Money laundering is carried out by cattle ranchers through front companies, such as Agropecuaria El Búfalo, as described by the Prosecutor's Office. These companies also allow them to move a lot of cash to pay the illegal armed actors who protect them or with whom they do business. One of these cases occurred on March 23, 2015, at the José María Córdova airport in Medellín, when Jonathan Horacio Alcina León, a worker of "Toto Ariza" in El Búfalo, was captured transporting 1,000 million pesos in a briefcase. Once arrested, Alcina León told the authorities that he was an employee of the company and that the money would be used to pay a debt with another company called Triple Zeta SAS.

Alcina's capture occurred thanks to the information received by the police from a reliable source who worked within the criminal gang "Los Pachelly". For more than ten months, the source helped the institution identify several of its members, revealing important information such as the support received by the criminal organization known as 'Gulf Clan'. A key detail that the source provided to the Police was that a person from Cúcuta, on an Avianca flight, would deliver 1,000 million pesos to "Los Pachelly." After verifying the physical description of the person in charge of moving the money, Jonathan Alcina León was immediately approached at the airport by the officers.



HECHOS

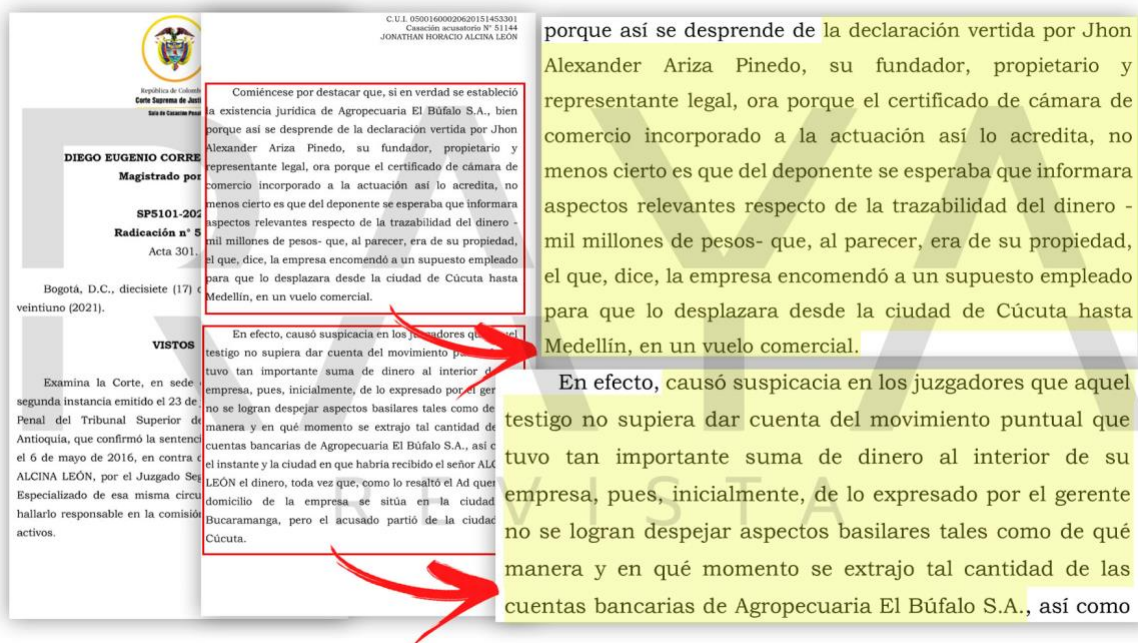
En la noche del 23 de marzo de 2015, en virtud de información suministrada por una fuente humana, miembros de la Dijin procedieron a la retención de JONATHAN HORACIO ALCINA LEÓN, justo en el momento en que arribó al aeropuerto José María Córdoba de Rionegro (Ant.), en un vuelo procedente de la ciudad de Cúcuta, pues, según lo indicó el informante, traía en su poder mil millones de pesos con el propósito de pagar la «nómina» de un grupo delincencial al margen de la Ley.

En efecto, cuando los policiales tuvieron contacto con ALCINA LEÓN, este les manifestó que en su equipaje portaba la suma de \$999'930.000.00, sin que pudiera justificar su origen, razón por la que los policiales procedieron a su captura y la consecuente incautación del dinero.

On March 23, 2015, at the José María Córdoba airport in Medellín, Jonathan Horacio Alcina León, a worker at El Búfalo, was captured, who was transporting 1,000 million pesos in cash to pay the criminal gang “Los Pachelly.”

On June 23, 2017, the Criminal Chamber of the Superior Court of the Judicial District of Antioquia sentenced Alcina to 10 years in prison after finding him responsible for money laundering, the Cassation Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice gave the final sentence on November 17, 2021. During the process, the Court heard “Toto Ariza”, who posed as a cattle rancher from Santander, and confirmed that Alcina worked at his company, although he said that he didn’t have any social security. He stated that he was engaged in various jobs within Agropecuaria El Búfalo, while he had the authorization to move large sums of money, which he did through a letter authorized by his partner and sister Yeddy Andrea Ariza Pineda, endorsing all banking transactions. However, the Court clarified that this authorization was “nowhere to be found.”

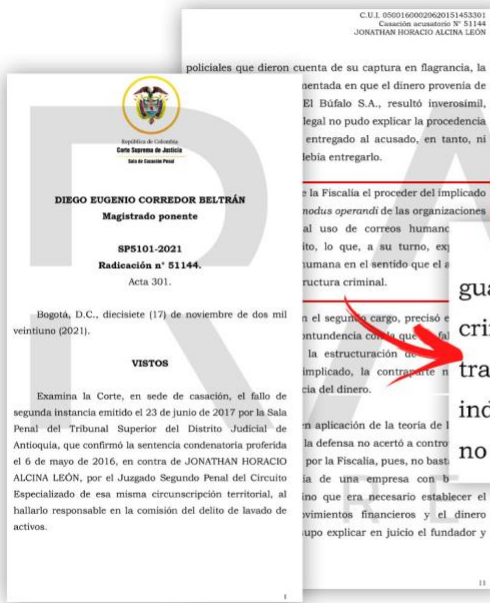
In its decision, the Court expected “Toto Ariza” to provide more detailed and relevant information regarding the traceability of the money he supposedly owned. “It caused suspicion among the judges that the witness did not know how to account for such an important sum of money within his company, since, it was not possible to provide basic information, such as: In what way and at what time was such an amount withdrawn from the bank accounts of Agropecuaria El Búfalo S.A.? What were the moment and the city in which Mr. Alcina León would have received the money, since, as he (alias “Toto Ariza”) highlighted, the company's domicile is in Bucaramanga. Still, the accused left from the city of Cúcuta”?



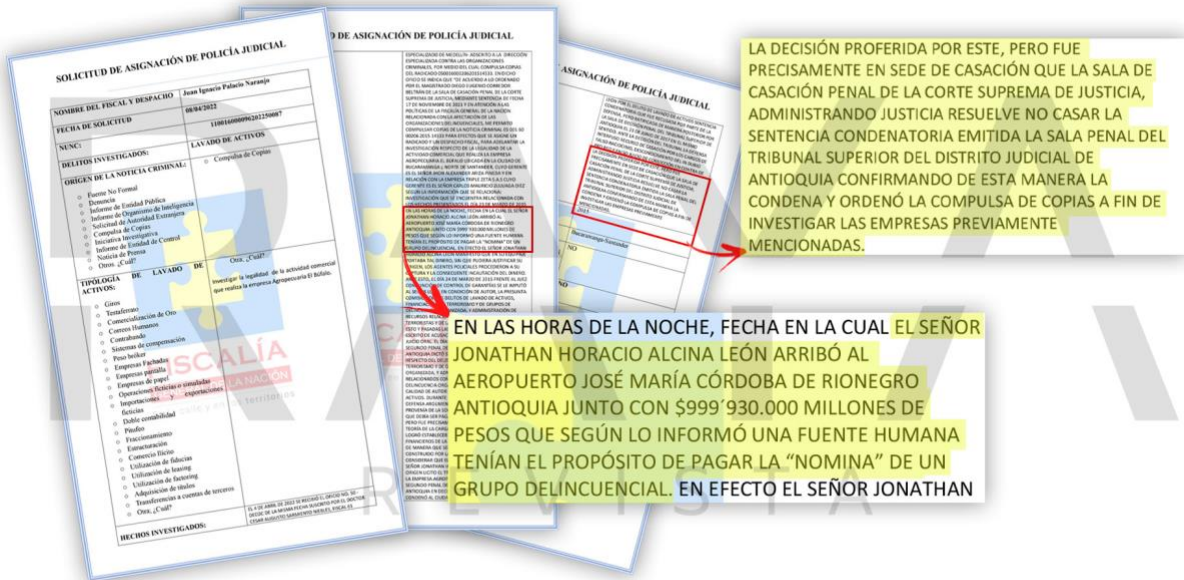
At the trial that ended with the conviction of Alcina León, the Supreme Court of Justice assured that it expected that “Toto Ariza” would provide more detailed and relevant information regarding the traceability of the money that supposedly belonged to him.

One of the strategies that Alcina León's defense used to try to prove that the money was legal was the bank certificates that Agropecuaria El Búfalo has in the BBVA Bank and Western banks. However, the high court concluded in its 2021 decision that these certifications do not satisfy the legal origin of the 1,000 million pesos found in Alcina León; the BBVA slip from March 2015 - when El Búfalo worker was captured - the highest transaction was for 150 million pesos, on March 10, 2015, that is 13 days before Alcina León capture at the Medellín airport.

During the trial, the Prosecutor's Office made it clear that this case is closely related to the modus operandi of criminal organizations dedicated to the use of human couriers to transport illicit money. In this case, to benefit a band that emerged from the paramilitary Bloc Centaurus of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC in Spanish): “Los Pachelly”. For this reason, after the conviction, the Supreme Court also certified copies to investigate the companies involved in this case, however, that request has not been prioritized by the Prosecutor's Office.



For the Prosecutor's Office, the actions of Alcina León from Agropecuaria El Búfalo in the management of the 1,000 million, are related to the modus operandi of criminal organizations dedicated to the use of human couriers to transport illicit money.



In 2021, the Supreme Court of Justice ordered the certification of copies against Agropecuaria El Búfalo, to investigate the illicit activities of the company owned by "Toto Ariza".

RAYA Magazine found that the person in charge of carrying out the illegal operations on behalf of Agropecuaria El Búfalo is called: Feisal Alberto Jimenez. The report 9790 of the Colombian Financial Information and Analysis Unit (UIAF in Spanish), dated March 23, 2021, says that Feisal, as a partner and legal representative, “carried out the alleged money laundering through the receipt and transportation of more than 66.3 billion pesos from companies and people within the livestock sector, with corporate and economic ties, mainly, with Jhon Alexander Ariza Pineda, during the period 2008 to 2018.” According to records from the Bogotá Chamber of Commerce, on August 29, 2008, Feisal was appointed by Yeddy Andrea Ariza Pineda (sister of “Toto” Ariza) as the person in charge of opening the offices of Agropecuaria El Búfalo in Bucaramanga.

The Prosecutor's Office requested to trace Feisal's criminal record to clarify his financial relationship with “Toto Ariza.” The Direction of Criminal Investigation and INTERPOL (DIJIN), on July 21, 2021, affirmed that Feisal was sentenced on April 14, 1998, to three years in prison for manufacturing and trafficking weapons and ammunition for exclusive use of the Armed Forces. On the other hand, regarding his relationship with the state forces, some certificates show that he acquired a house in Bucaramanga in 2007 thanks to the subsidies granted to him by the Military and Police Housing Promotion Fund.

UIAF Report Snippet:

HOY 8 DE ABRIL DE 2021 SE RECIBE, PROCEDENTE DE LA DELEGADA PARA LAS FINANZAS CRIMINALES, EL INFORME DE INTELIGENCIA FINANCIERA CASO UIAF 9790 DE FECHA 23 DE MARZO DE 2021 Y ACTA 014 DEL 19 DE MARZO 2021, EN EL QUE SE INDICA QUE A TRAVÉS DE FUENTES ABIERTAS, SE CONOCIÓ QUE EN NOVIEMBRE DE 2020, LA FGN CAPTURÓ A DOCE RECONOCIDOS GANADEROS DE SANTANDER, POR SU PRESUNTO VÍNCULO CON UNA RED DE LAVADO DE ACTIVOS QUE SE VALIÓ DE LAS EXPORTACIONES DE GANADO. DENTRO DE LOS CAPTURADOS ESTUVO JHON ALEXANDER ARIZA PINEDA, CONOCIDO COMO EL "TOTO ARIZA", JHON HORACIO RUEDA RECONOCIDO COMO EL "ZAR DEL ORO", MAURICIO SUAREZ Y CESAR OSMA CHINCHILLA, ACTUALMENTE SE ENCUENTRAN EN LIBERTAD PERO CONTINUAN VINCULADOS A LA INVESTIGACIÓN, ALGUNAS DE ESTAS PERSONAS SE ENCUENTRAN VINCULADAS CON EMPRESAS COMO "AGROPECUARIA EL BUFALO", "INVERSIONES ARIZA QUIJERO", "OCA TRADING", "LA GLORIA GANADERIA" Y "MARKETING DE COLOMBIA", COMO SOCIOS Y REPRESENTANTES LEGALES EN COMÚN. PRESUNTO LAVADO DE ACTIVOS POR PARTE DE FEISAL ALBERTO JIMÉNEZ, A TRAVÉS DE LA RECEPCIÓN Y TRANSPORTE DE MÁS DE \$66.307 MILLONES, PROVENIENTES EN SU GRAN MAYORÍA DE EMPRESAS Y PERSONAS UBICADAS DENTRO DEL SECTOR GANADERO, DONDE EXISTEN VÍNCULOS SOCIETARIOS Y ECONÓMICOS PRINCIPALMENTE CON JHON ALEXANDER ARIZA PINEDA, DURANTE EL PERIODO DE 2008 AL 2018.

Form Snippet:

INFORME FINAL No. 12 - XXXXX

7.1 Obtener en la REGISTRADURIA NACIONAL DEL ESTADO CIVIL copia de la tarjeta decadal para el fin de identificación e individualización de las personas naturales que se relacionan a continuación:

NOMBRE	IDENTIFICACIÓN
FEISAL ALBERTO JIMENEZ	91.105.661
LAURA FRANCO GOMEZ	63.556.529

El día 06 de mayo de 2021, se solicitó mediante correo electrónico al Grupo Litoscopia litoscopia@litoscopia.gov.co de la Fiscalía General de la Nación, Área Criminalística, la respectiva consulta en base de datos de la Registraduría Nacional de Estado Civil, de las personas arriba mencionadas junto con su núcleo familiar, sin que a la fecha se haya recibido respuesta alguna.

El día 11 de junio de 2021, se reciben dos (02) correos electrónicos uno por cada persona solicitada, en el cual incluyen a su núcleo familiar, los mismos son enviados por la funcionaria ALEXANDRA BERMUDEZ, de la Sección de Análisis Criminal - Central Consulta Base de Datos.

Es preciso indicar, que como archivos adjuntos de los correos en mención, se encontraban la Tarjeta de Preparación y/o Decadalizar de cada uno de las personas solicitadas, así como las de su núcleo familiar, los mismos se imprimirán para que hagan parte de los anexos del presente informe.

Así las cosas, se procederá a plasmar información del núcleo familiar de cada una de las personas solicitadas, así:

NOMBRE	IDENTIFICACIÓN
FEISAL ALBERTO JIMENEZ	91.105.661

Primer apellido: JIMENEZ
 Segundo apellido: N/A
 Primer nombre: FEISAL
 Segundo nombre: ALBERTO
 Fecha nacimiento: 06/11/1966
 Lugar nacimiento: SUATA - SANTANDER
 Fecha expedición: 08/09/1988
 Vigencia: Vigente

NUCLEO FAMILIAR FEISAL ALBERTO JIMENEZ

DIRECCIÓN ESPECIALIZADA DE INVESTIGACIONES FINANCIERAS
 ALVARO GALLE (24 de JULIO) AV. SANTA ROSA 1700 # 8 BOGOTÁ D. C. - BRANCO 1000 11111
 Teléfono: 3106 0840 CPJ
 Publicación: 2016-03-07

The person in charge of the illegal operations on behalf of Agropecuaria El Búfalo is called: Feisal Alberto Jiménez partner of “Toto Ariza” who carried out money laundering through the receipt and transportation of more than 66.3 billion pesos from the livestock sector.

Gold and land: other facades of drug cattle-ranchers

Jhon Horacio Rueda Polanía, alias the “Gold Czar,” was one of the cattle ranchers captured along with “Toto Ariza” in November 2020. According to press reports, he was finally arrested in the State of Zulia (Venezuela), a decade ago, on April 15, 2010, after being wanted by Colombia since 2005 for drug trafficking, conspiracy to commit a crime, and management of capital from drug trafficking. In the Interpol databases, it was recorded that Rueda pretended to deliver apparent pieces of solid gold, but the investigation showed that he was just gold plating and thus able to justify the increase in his assets.

The president back then, Álvaro Uribe thanked the government of Hugo Chávez for his capture and subsequent deportation. “Yesterday, the Interpol in Venezuela handed over Mr. John Horacio Rueda Polaniato to Interpol Colombia, captured in Venezuela on April 15, 2010; linked to drug trafficking and money laundering. He is already in custody in Bogotá,” said Uribe from Cúcuta on April 24 of that year, in the middle of a security council that he held in the border city. What is unknown is why, months later, Rueda was released. About 12 years later, in February 2022, amid the presidential campaign, he appeared in a photograph, posing next to a businessman and candidate from Barranquilla, Alejandro Char Chaljub.



Alejandro Char and John Horacio Rueda, who appears on the right of the photo, during the 2022 presidential campaign.

Rueda is a partner of “Toto Ariza” and in turn, he was the partner of the famous drug cattle rancher José Guillermo Hernández, alias “Ñeñe Hernández.” The relationship between the three “businessmen”, “Toto”, “Ñeñe” and Rueda, can not only be proven by the photos published by different media channels, in which they appear together with former presidents

Álvaro Uribe and Iván Duque, but also, by the audios revealed today by RAYA Magazine. These are conversations between “Ñeñe Hernández” and a person named Pablo Santamaría about a business that involves a property of “Toto Ariza” in Bogotá’s Free Trade Zone.

The first call between “Ñeñe Hernández” and Santamaría was on May 30, 2018 at around 5:29 pm. In that conversation, Santamaría told “Ñeñe” that for several days he had been looking for Jhon Rueda to pay him a debt they had, but he was not answering his calls or answering his messages. According to what he told “Ñeñe”, Rueda owed him some interest from money lent to him from a property that Ariza, Hernández, and Rueda had in Cartagena under the figure of common ownership planned to be seized if he did not return the money. However, he asked the deceased if that would affect “Toto Ariza” and him, because “I didn't want to cause problems since these are my friends.” At that moment, Hernández interrupted him and told him that he was also looking for John Rueda because he had a “hot” business.

The business that Hernández was referring to was selling some plots of Ariza and Rueda’s land to the same client, which were adjacent to the Free Trade Zone. “I have the business done with the Bogotá Free Trade Zone and I urgently need some papers from him,” “Ñeñe” said to Santamaría. It was during the next call, on May 30 at 5:34 pm. when “Ñeñe” explained to Santamaría that it would involve the lands of “Toto Ariza” and Jhon Rueda in the Free Trade Zone: “I'm going to help you sell them. You know that you have mortgaged land there, one belongs to “Toto”, I have already sold that land, I went to Bogotá last week, I already delivered the other paperwork, they have already reviewed everything, but people need both plots. And I am looking for him (Rueda) urgently because they are asking me for my paperwork: the certificate of freedom and tradition and that faggot has not answered me yet, I am going to have to call the sister and see if she can locate him so that she can call me and I talk to him once and for all,” commented Ñeñe.

Listen to the conversation (In Spanish): [May 30, 2018 - 5:33 PM Pablo Santamaria second call with Ñeñe Hernández.](#)

Given this situation, “Ñeñe Hernandez” proposed to Pablo Santamaría that the two of them should meet with “Toto Ariza” in Bucaramanga to look for Jhon Rueda. The meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, June 12, 2018. Because of Santamaría's insistence on locating Jhon Rueda, “Ñeñe Hernández” tried to calm him. “I will find him, I have to wait for “Toto” because that is an easy business and there are very rich and serious people interested as it is in the Free Trade Zone of Bogotá”, the “Ñeñe” confirmed. With the promise of meeting in Bucaramanga to locate Rueda, they ended the call.

Listen to the conversation (In Spanish): [June 6, 2018, 3:45 pm: Pablo Santamaría about the property of John Rueda Bucaramanga in Cartagena airport](#)

The last call that RAYA found out about was from August 5, 2018. With a more distressed and concerned tone, Santamaría called Hernández to ask him about the whereabouts of John Rueda. The “Ñeñe” responded that the only thing he knew was that he was in Medellín. In the talk, Hernández said that Rueda's attitude was harming him and that he was not going to allow

it. Nine months later, “Ñeñe Hernández” was murdered in Brazil, in the middle of an alleged robbery in which one of his Rolex watches was stolen.



Jhon Alexander Ariza Pineda, alias “Toto Ariza” and José Guillermo Hernández, alias “Ñeñe Hernández” on March 5, 2014.



Photo of “Toto and Ñeñe from April 26, 2014: “Brother, my compadre, it's pure rum and work, I don't know what to do,” Hernández described the photo on his Instagram account.



Former congressman of the Democratic Center Party, Iván Aguilar, former president Álvaro Uribe Vélez together with “Toto Ariza” and “Ñeñe Hernández” at an event for Iván Duque's presidential campaign at the Bucaramanga Commerce Center in December 2017.



“Ñeñe Hernández” and “Toto Ariza” in Brazil, during the trip in which the narco-rancher was murdered.

The Buffaloes of “Toto” are like Pablo Escobar's Hippos

RAYA traveled to Sabana de Torres, where “Toto Ariza” is recognized as a powerful owner of extensive livestock farms full of buffaloes and cows. We passed by two of them, “Montecristo” and “La Subasta”, in which dozens of these animals grazed in dry and extensive pastures, next to trunks of what were once trees and that now are ashes gone with the wind. The distance that separates these two farms is less than three kilometers and they are located on the Magdalena Medio highway, the same one that connects the center of the country with the North of Colombia.

A leader from the region, whose name we withhold to protect his life, told us during the visit how livestock farming was consolidated in Sabana de Torres when “Toto Ariza” along with his partners, arrived in the municipality at the beginning of the 2000s, where rice crops used to thrive. “Toto” began to fill these lands with cows and buffaloes. He even bought land at a very high price. If the price was worth 20 million pesos, he would pay 40. He always had many hectares of land distributed over several farms. As far as I know, “Toto Ariza” exchanged these lands with the “Ñeñe Hernández” for some land in the Free Zone,” he affirmed.



Photo Caption: RAYA visited the “Montecristo” farm that belonged to “Toto Ariza” where dozens of cattle grazed in dry and extensive pastures. Photo: Rafael Zúñiga

The first buffaloes that arrived in Colombia came from Trinidad and Tobago in 1967. The extinct Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA in Spanish) purchased thirty females and five

males and sent them to the municipality of Guapi (Cauca) to be used as cargo animals by palm producers. As a result of the fast adaptation of this species in the different climates of the country and its high milk production, since 1972, the Livestock Fund (Fondo Ganadero) imported more and encouraged its production and marketing nationwide.

Although buffaloes are not classified as an invasive species in the country, they are compared to the hippos that Pablo Escobar brought to his famous ranch (Nápoles), located in the same region of Magdalena Medio. Invasive species are those that, accidentally or intentionally, by introducing them into an environment that is not their native, manage to adapt and colonize it, which makes them an agent of change that threatens native ecosystems and biological diversity. For example, what happens with the buffaloes in Sábana de Torres is that they can initiate and modify river basins and their dynamics, harming the survival of aquatic animals such as a wide variety of fish and the manatee, an endangered species.

For the organization Cabildo Verde from Sábana de Torres, the buffaloes have not been declared invasive species because they are used within a productive system, and do not generate the same environmental alerts as hippos. "The day we eat or sell a hippopotamus, we will see it as a business, as it happens with the buffalos," says the environmental organization. Currently, there are 485,141 buffaloes distributed in 6,033 properties in the country, mainly concentrated in Córdoba, Antioquia, and Santander, according to the latest ICA census.

Another of the farms that "Toto" has in the Sabana de Torres is called "El Cocuy", which has an area of about 60 hectares and a trail of dispossession. Ariza acquired this property in 2009 when he bought it from Mr. Álvaro Angarita, through another of his companies called Inversiones Ariza Quintero, dedicated to the trade of agricultural raw materials and the sale of live animals. Its assets are more than 5,000 million pesos and its headquarters are in Bogotá. Regarding the property of "Toto Ariza", the Santander Civil Land Restitution Chamber studied a 2019 request made by Jorge Anibal Sanjuan Ropero and his nephew Wilson Trujillo Navarro, who, as owners of the property, requested its restitution. As a result of the armed conflict, they had to leave the area due to threats they received from the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

The dispossession of the land of the Ropero family was carried out by the paramilitaries of the Bolívar Central Block of the AUC, under the command of Fernando Pérez Alzate, alias "Charly", at the end of March 2000 when they entered the farm "El Cocuy" and stole the power plant including around 520 cattle heads. Three days after the paramilitary attack, Wilson Trujillo decided to return to harvest a rice crop, which he had forgotten the day the armed men arrived and on which his family's economy depended. However, "Charly" arrived at the property and gave him the next threat: "that if he valued his life, he would evacuate because he needed the land, hence, he immediately went to the municipality of San Alberto to meet with his family" this is what the document from the Civil Land Restitution Chamber of Santander says.

After the actions against Jorge Anibal Sanjuan Ropero and Wilson Trujillo Navarro at the end of 2000, they sold the "El Cocuy" farm to Angarita Martínez, before he transferred it to "Toto Ariza" in 2009. When Ariza Quintero Investments received the call from the Civil Land

Restitution Chamber to hear their side of the story due to the request made by the victims, they did not talk about the facts that forced the sale of the property nor recognized the reasons for a restitution request. As a legal representative of the company, “Toto Ariza” added that considering that Wilson Trujillo Navarro did not leave the region and instead remained living there for a long time, “the business carried out was legitimate.”

When studying the case presented by Jorge Anibal Sanjuan Ropero and Wilson Trujillo Navarro, the Santander Civil Land Restitution Chamber indicated that both statements were made in good faith and spontaneously. “They are consistent with the context of violence outlined, without incurring relevant contradictions that make them inconsistent, and their statements show that they have been victims of forced displacement.” Based on the above, on September 26, 2019, the Chamber issued its decision declaring the nullity of the sale contracts for the “El Cocuy” property, both the one made in favor of Álvaro Angarita and the one made with Inversiones Ariza Quintero. Despite this, to date, the farm has not been returned to its owners, while in Sábana de Torres they recognize that the rancher used this property to consolidate his business and increase his fortune.

One of the properties that “Toto” has in Sabana de Torres is called “El Cocuy”, which he bought in 2009. Ten years later, the Civil Land Restitution Chamber of Santander forced the cancellation of all contracts, including one of “Toto”, and returned the land to its true owners who had to sell because of pressure from the AUC.

Cattle ranchers like “Toto” Ariza and “Ñeñe” Hernández are clear examples of how buffalo meat is marketed, neglecting the animal's well-being and without caring about the environmental consequences that this activity generates to ecosystems. They fake amounts to increase their fortunes with money that would come from drug trafficking.

It is a prosperous business, they say in many regions of Colombia, however, it is also an activity that has been destroying the environment and affecting other animal species. Senators like Andrea Padilla and environmental organizations like the Foundation for Sustainable Development promoted the “Deforestation-free Meat” bill, which finally collapsed in Congress. The bill aimed to regulate the traceability and marketing system for both buffalo and beef cattle, to know where the animals are coming from, and how many kilos they add up for sale or slaughter, and also intended for this to help guarantee that the transportation of livestock is carried out in good conditions of cleanliness and safety.



The introduction of the buffaloes into the region Magdalena Medio has generated visible deforestation in the region. Photo: Rafael Zúñiga.

One of the characteristics of the buffaloes located in the municipality of Sabana de Torres is that they are a species that needs large quantities of water to cool off from the heat that hits the region of Magdalena Medio, for this reason when they spend many hours under the sun, they proceed to submerge themselves in the wetlands and smear themselves with mud, which helps them lower their body temperature and protect themselves from the mosquitoes that abound there.

According to the organization Cabildo Verde, the fact that the buffaloes enter the wetlands has a major impact on the environment, such as the retention of water due to the animals' footprints, the alteration of the water basins, the migration of fauna and the contamination of the soil and the water through excrement and urine. "All of this causes climate impacts that generate greater effects and the links of the biological corridors that are located around the wetlands where extensive livestock farming currently occurs, impacting plant growth and consuming native species. These environmental impacts are not being addressed by the authorities," commented James Murillo from the NGO Cabildo Verde,

Two hours from the town center of Sabana de Torres is the swamp Paredes, one of the wetlands most affected by buffalo ranching. It is a place where you can see these animals loose throughout the territory, without any type of fence that prevents them from entering into the

water. When RAYA crossed this swamp, the day was cloudy. The country was going through a crisis generated by the El Niño Phenomenon and 24 municipalities of Santander, including Sabana de Torres, had been declared by the department in public disaster as a result of the water shortage that was recorded. Therefore, it was evident that even the buffaloes celebrated the proximity of the rains since they were no longer seen in herds within the wetlands as seen in the videos that the leaders have recorded in the most inclement times of summer.

[Watch the video:](#) The buffaloes immerse themselves in the wetlands and smear themselves with mud, which helps them lower their body temperature and protect themselves from mosquitoes. Video: Green Council (Cabildo Verde)

For the organization, Cabildo Verde, the most delicate problem that arises in wetlands when buffaloes take over them is that they enter into direct competition for food with other species such as manatees, fish, or birds. “The buffalo can enter the water and eat aquatic plants, but animals like the manatee or fish cannot go out and eat grass, so it is at a significant disadvantage. On other occasions, they prevent migratory birds from laying their eggs. In addition, they generate a migration of fish, since they do not find spaces within the wetlands and are forced to leave. Today those waters are completely invaded by buffaloes.”

It is important to highlight that wetlands are ecosystems in which water is the main factor that controls the environment, including plant and animal life. According to the United Nations, although wetlands only cover about 6% of the Earth's surface, they are the habitat of 40% of all plant and animal species. On February 2, celebrating World Wetlands Day, a call of attention showed that these ecosystems are suffering greater deterioration, loss, and degradation due to rapid population growth, unsustainable production, consumption, technological development, and climate change. “With a 5% loss globally in the last 50 years, wetlands are our most threatened ecosystem, disappearing three times faster than forests,” reads the shared statement.



When buffaloes enter the wetlands, they modify watersheds, generate migration of fauna, and contaminate soil and water through excrement and urine. At the same time, they impact the soil generating erosion making the field unproductive.

As occurs in livestock farming, in Colombia there are no laws that allow traceability of the sale and distribution of buffaloes, which prevents records of heads sold, which farms or areas of the country they come from, and under what conditions they are transported. The different sources consulted by RAYA affirmed that livestock is the first economic value of the region since

it is more profitable to sell a head of livestock than rice or banana, the main commercial products, before livestock consolidation.

When touring Sabana de Torres and speaking with leaders in the region, we have confirmed that buffalo ranching is an activity that is growing and carried out by both large and small landowners. According to the sources consulted by this magazine, most of the buffaloes raised in this area of Magdalena Medio, go directly to the Bucaramanga farms in trucks that cross long trails exposed to different temperatures and long transportation periods, very prolonged fasting and conditions that generate stress and impact the well-being of the buffaloes. To date, and according to the ICA, in this municipality of Magdalena Medio, there are a total of 14,401 buffaloes distributed across 218 farms.

One of the investigations that studied the animal welfare conditions of buffaloes and cows in the transportation process is “Stress Biomarkers as Indicators of Animal Welfare in Beef Cattle” by the Department of Animal Health of the University of Manizales. The document describes that the animals' well-being is affected during the journeys, which is based on its harmonious relationship with the environment, under the premise of the "five freedoms": hunger, diseases, anguish, discomfort, and natural behavior.

The environmentalist senator from Alianza Verde, Andrea Padilla, spoke along these lines. In an interview with RAYA Magazine, she stated that during transportation, the animals defecate and urinate inside the trucks and thus rot in their fecal matter, “causing them to die and drop in in the way.” In her conversation with this magazine, the congresswoman affirmed that in entities such as the ICA, during the preparation of mobilization guide documents and animal transportation certificates, major corruption cases occur.

Why do large ranchers have so much power in Colombia? It is the question surrounding this investigation that is in line with the claims of the communities of Sabana de Torres (Santander) who have been affected by an activity that generated the deterioration of natural resources and put their subsistence at risk. The competent authorities do not look decisively at a business that not only goes against the rights and well-being of buffaloes and cows but also serves to allow narco-ranchers like “Toto Ariza” to laundry money from drug trafficking, finance paramilitary groups, dispossess lands, and destroy ecosystems.

[Watch the video:](#) In Colombia, there are no laws that allow traceability of the sale and distribution of buffaloes, which prevents records of the conditions under which they are transported.

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