

Activist Apparently Kills Self

Police Investigating Area Cattle Deaths

The Associated Press

DEMING — An environmentalist who had been questioned about the killing of 10 cattle near his home has been found dead in his greenhouse, the apparent victim of a self-inflicted gunshot, investigators said.

An automatic pistol was found in the hand of Tony Merten, and a suicide letter has turned up, Luna County sheriff's Lt. Armando Carrillo said Thursday night.

But Carrillo said he would wait for an autopsy report from the state Office of the Medical Investigator before deciding definitely whether the case was a suicide.

He declined to disclose the contents of the supposed suicide let-

ter but said it made no mention of the Feb. 15 cattle shootings at the Smyer Ranch.

Carrillo and state Livestock Board investigator Tom Bill Black said Merten was one of several people questioned after the 10 cattle were found slain.

"He was (questioned) along with everybody else who lived out there," Carrillo said. "His residence was the closest to where the cattle were shot."

Black said Merten lived within three miles of the scene.

Local environmentalist Pat Dancer, a member of the Luna County chapter of Sangre de Cristo Animal Protection, and Kevin Bixby of the Southwest Environmental Center in Las Cruces said Merten had been a leader of the Sierra Club's Las Cruces chapter.

Dancer said one of Merten's

brothers "had talked to him recently and that he was not depressed and was excited about his life." Bixby urged deputies to "do a really thorough job of investigating the possibility of a homicide."

Carrillo said Merten had sent the handwritten letter to a friend in Aspen, Colo., Bert Fingerhut, who called the sheriff's office in Deming urging deputies to check on his friend. The letter said Merten planned to "check out" Feb. 18, Carrillo said.

Deputies found the body of Merten, 44, in the greenhouse behind his home 25 miles east of here near the Floridas Mountains around 7 p.m. Wednesday.

He had a 9mm Smith & Wesson automatic pistol in his hand and a bullet wound in his head, Carrillo said. Merten appeared to have been dead four to 10 days, he said.