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## Santeria priest appealing Eules animal slaughter ban

Associated Press

EULESS, Texas — A Santeria priest who lost a federal challenge alleging Eules' ban on animal slaughter encroached on his right to practice religion in his home is appealing the case.

The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty filed an appeal Tuesday on behalf of Jose Merced to the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans.

"The First Amendment was written to protect the ability of all faiths to worship in their own homes and in their own way," Kevin "Seamus" Hasson, founder and president of the Becket Fund, a Washington-based civil rights law firm, said in a news release. "People of all faiths should be concerned when the government

says someone cannot practice their religion in their own home."

Merced — an Oba, or priest — said animal sacrifices are an essential devotion in Santeria, a religion born in Cuba by Yoruba slaves who fused elements of Roman Catholicism with beliefs they brought with them from Africa.

Merced sought a permit from the city but was denied permission to sacrifice goats as part of a religious ceremony. For the rite, a 4-inch blade is used to sever an animal's carotid artery, letting blood fall on a shrine. The animal is then prepared and eaten.

Eules officials have insisted in court that local sanitation ordinances prohibit the slaughter of certain kinds of animals inside city limits. Officials could not discuss the case because the city does not comment on pending litigation, said Eules spokeswoman Betsy Deck.

U.S. District Judge John McBryde ruled in favor of the city of Eules last month, saying Merced could perform his animal sacrifices

elsewhere, but not in the Fort Worth suburb.

Merced said the ruling prevents him from carrying out ceremonies required by his religion.

"I just hope that this time they can make the right decision," Merced said Tuesday.

In 1993, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye in Hialeah, Fla., and issued an opinion protecting the rights of Santeria practitioners to ritually slaughter animals.

"The issue of Santeria and animal sacrifice has already been decided by the United States Supreme Court. I'm pretty sure the Constitution of the United States still applies in Eules, Texas," Lori Windham, an attorney for the Becket Fund, said in the release.