

The State of the Horse Industry Since the Closing of the Horse Harvesting Facilities

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In September of 2007 the last horse processing plant in the United States closed its doors. This came about due to pressure from animal rights groups opposing horse harvesting. A state law was passed that forced the Dekalb, Illinois, plant to close and this ruling was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit.

Approximately 100,000 head of horses each year were being sent to U.S. horse processing plants prior to their closure. This is approximately 1 percent of the horse population in the United States (Ahern et al., 2006). The groups that fought for the closing of the processing plants do not want horses processed for human consumption. The goal of this paper is to look at what effect these closings have had on the horse industry. This paper will analyze four arguments supporting the plant closures and the present environment due to the closure of the plants.

The main statements by the lead groups supporting a ban on horse processing include:

Argument 1. The United States should not participate in such a cruel, inhumane practice (HSUS, 2008)

Argument 2. The United States should not provide horse meat to satisfy other countries' needs when Americans do not eat horse meat (Weil, 2007).

Argument 3. Horse owners will be responsible and take care of their horses (Horse Talk, 2007)

Argument 4. Owners have other methods to deal with unwanted horses, such as euthanasia, burial, sell the horse, or send to rescue facility (Horse Talk, 2007)

Let's take a closer look at these statements.

Argument 1. **The United States should not participate in such a cruel, inhumane practice.**

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) lists two accepted methods of euthanasia for horses: 1) overdose of barbiturate anesthesia, sodium pentobarbital administered with a sedative, 2) physical method of euthanasia from a gunshot or penetrating captive bolt causing trauma to the cerebral hemisphere and brainstem resulting in an immediate painless and humane death (AVMA, 2007).

U. S. horse harvesting facilities use the captive bolt method of euthanasia. As the AVMA states, "when properly used by skilled personnel with well-maintained equipment, physical methods of euthanasia (captive bolt is a physical means of euthanasia) may result in less fear and anxiety and be more rapid, painless, humane, and practical than other forms of euthanasia" (AVMA, 2007). Dr. Temple Grandin, PhD, designer of livestock handling facilities and professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University is an expert in methods of handling animals at harvesting facilities. In an interview on the radio program, "Horse Talk," from Park City, Utah, Dr. Grandin indicated that done correctly euthanasia by captive bolt is second only to chemical euthanasia in discussing humane methods of euthanasia (Grandin, 2007). Jim Tucker, the manager of the Cavel International horse harvesting plant in DeKalb, Illinois, stated a licensed veterinarian was on site any time an animal was euthanized (J. Tucker, personal communication, November 27, 2007). Dr. Mark Lutschaunig, DVM, Director of the American

Veterinary Medical Association Governmental Relations Divisions, indicated the horse processing facilities were highly regulated and a veterinarian was present to record any inhumane treatment (Lutschaunig, 2007). Lutschaunig also stated that the plants employ highly trained personnel utilizing the captive bolt (2007). Dr. Robert Lewis, DVM, American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) Representative for the Legislative Advisory Council, stated the AAEP sent a team to the Texas plants and these equine veterinarians deemed the plants humane and the plants are USDA inspected and inspectors are on site (Lewis, 2007). The groups behind the ban, instead of helping the animals they set out to help, have created a situation where horses are neglected due to a lack of options. They have also condemned horses to shipment out of the country to foreign plants with less than humane methods of slaughter.

Argument 2. The United States should not provide horse meat to satisfy the needs of other countries when Americans do not eat horse meat.

The American Horse Defense Fund, which is a fervent supporter of bills now in the United States Congress that would ban slaughtering horse for meat, declared that “foreign-owned slaughter industry need to understand that Americans will never view horse as dinner.” It’s a ringing statement, but “it’s not an entirely accurate one” (Weil, 2007).

Americans have eaten horse meat at different periods of our history, for example during WWII and post war years (Weil, 2007). Beef and pork were scarce or costly so horse meat appeared or was readily available in butcher shops. In 1951, in Portland, Oregon, horsemeat became an important item on dinner tables with three times as many horse butchers selling three times as much meat. Also, in 1973 with meat prices soaring, a butcher shop in Connecticut converted to horse meat selling 6,000 lbs a day. Into the late 1970s, the Harvard Faculty Club served horse steaks as a regular menu item, only abandoned due to rerouting of traffic flow causing delivering problems (Weil, 2007).

The United States has been providing horse meat to many different countries for decades. Before 1979 horses were shipped live on boats to Europe, but due to transport concerns and high mortality, this international transport for processing was prohibited (Stull, 2001). The harvesting plants opened in the United States to process animals in country and ship the meat overseas. Four ounces of horse meat contains 20% greater protein than beef (sirloin) with 25% less fat, nearly 20% less sodium, double the iron and 1 mg less cholesterol. Compared to ground beef, horse meat has 55% more protein, 25% less fat, 30% less cholesterol, and 27% less sodium. For many less developed countries and with the BSE problems in beef, horse meat is a better dietary substitute (Ahern et al., 2006). As stated above the groups supporting this ban indicate that the U.S. should not provide meat to other countries that we do not ourselves consume, but the United States harvesting plants provide products from sheep and beef carcasses which are not eaten by Americans and considered delicacies in foreign markets.

Argument 3. Horse owners will be responsible and take care of their horses so a ban on slaughter will not result in horses not being cared for.

Horse ownership has many different interpretations and levels of commitment. While many horse owners take very good care of their horses this does not hold true for everyone. While neglect may not be intentional in some instances, it happens. Educating owners to proper nutrition, dental and hoof care can make big changes to the horse’s management. Reports of horses being abandoned are on the increase (Associated Press, 2007). Reported through the Brownfield Ag News for American, “Closing horse processing plants in the United States has led to increased abandonment and neglect of horses in this country and the inhumane death of horses across the border” (Young, 2007). A Georgia Tifton Gazette article indicates rising neglect is evident across the state due to many factors, one of which is the closing of the slaughter houses (Cone, 2007). In Utah’s Department of Agriculture and Food, Terry Menlove, Director of the Division of Animal Industry, reports a larger number than usual of abandoned horses. Because of a lack of places to send older horses, some owners are keeping these horses and the

horses starve to death in the field (T. Menlove, personal communication, January 2, 2008). Reported in the *Drovers Alert* “the number of owners charged with animal cruelty due to neglected horses is on the rise as the price of horse ownership increases. So, the fallout from the closure of the slaughter facilities: More horse are suffering from starvation and neglect” (Henderson, 2008). The *Wall Street Journal* cites “the number of horses whose owners won’t or can’t properly care for them is mushrooming (Prada, 2008). C.J. Hadley, publisher of the magazine called *Range*, indicated that “animal lovers with big hearts and no idea what’s required to take care of a horse have shut down slaughterhouses that were needed” (Prada, 2008).

Argument 4. Owners have other methods to deal with unwanted horses, such as euthanasia, burial, sell the horse, or send to rescue facility.

While many options have been available to horse owners, more of these are becoming less available and more expensive. According to Dr. Temple Grandin 25 percent of horse owners are low income owners (Grandin, 2007) and according to the American Horse Council low to moderate income families make up 45 percent of horse owners with an annual household income between \$25,000 and \$75,000 (Ahern, 2006). “More than two million Americans own horses, and more than a third of those owners have a household income of less than \$50,000 (Prada, 2008). Any type of disruption of income can tip the scale when it comes to being a responsible horse owner. Many times these owners could count on making a little money at a sale but now the price for middle to lower end horses has severely dropped. Horses that a year ago would bring \$400 - \$500 now might bring \$50 - \$100 or might not sell. One auction company stated that “a few years ago unwanted horses may have gone for \$200 - \$300. Now they are around \$50 - \$100 (Byrns, 2007). Devin Mullet, owner of Kalona Sales Barn, Iowa, said that for the “first time in my life I’ve seen livestock that has no value” (Einhorn, 2008). This drop in U. S. horse value after the processing plants closure was predicted two years earlier by North et al. (2005, p.14). Due to high feed and hay prices many people can’t or don’t want the burden of continuing to feed a horse and others, including rescue facilities, can’t afford to take on any more horses due to the market and feed costs.

Chemical euthanasia by a veterinarian is a choice for horse owners in disposing of ill or chronically lame horses. This is expensive for the owner. Veterinary cost of euthanasia can range from \$60 - \$100 followed by the expense of disposing of the body. In many instances, due to environmental regulations, horses cannot be buried on site, but if allowed, the owner may well be looking at an additional \$300 or more in costs if a backhoe is required (Ahern et al., 2006 p 7,8). According to Ahern et al., (2006) and North et al., (2005, p. 4) landfills have taken carcasses in the past but some are now banning carcasses or charging a fee. Rendering plants will remove carcasses but some now are charging a substantial fee or will not pick up individual horses (Ahern et al., 2006, p.8).

Rescue facilities across the country are feeling the pinch. The *Pittsburg Post-Gazette* indicated “every horse rescue and farm animal rescue that I deal with currently has a “no room in the inn” sign on their barn doors. They all have waiting lists” (Fuoco, 2007). The *San Antonio Express News* indicated that “...rescues struggle with too many horses, too little money and no national standards” (Sandberg, 2007). Dr. Mark Lutschaunig also confirmed there are not enough rescues and retirements facilities out there to handle these horses; most are full and cannot take in any more horses not only due to space but partly due to the expense (2007). Research by Utah State University also shows the similar results. Brian Dees, President of the Georgia Equine Rescue League, stated that “the number of unwanted horses has gone through the roof; the number of requests to take horses off a person’s hand has gone up by as much as 5000 percent”. Dees stated not having the harvesting facilities is one of the worse things that has happened to the U.S. horse industry (B. Dees, personal communication, January 3, 2008). According to Morgan Silver, Executive Director of the Horse Protection Association of Florida, a bigger mess has been created by the closing of the houses before the real problem of excessive breeding was addressed (M. Silver, personal communication, January 3, 2008). Bill Whitman, co-owner of Horse- Angels

Ranch, Indiana, indicated contacts to his facility are up four fold. They are seeing younger horses people don't want to take care of anymore and they don't know how to deal with them (B. Whitman, personal communication, December 8, 2007). In an article Whitman stated last year "8,000 horses were sent from Indiana to Illinois for slaughter, but now slaughtering horses has been banned. With that avenue closed and more unwanted horses, "it's going to be a nightmare" (Vierebome, 2007). Kathleen Schwartz, Director and Founder of Days End Horse Rescue, Maryland, said that they get 3 – 5 emails a day from people looking to get rid of their horses which their rescue has to turn away. While she gives them the names of local rescues, she knows they are already busting at the seams (K. Schwartz, personal communication, October 16, 2007). Jenny Edwards, Director of Hope for Horses, Washington, echoes other rescues by saying her rescue is full. She also noted in the past the horses they were involved with were usually in good condition when they received them. Now they are seeing horses that are more sickly which increases time of stay and ultimately rescue costs. Horses that would have gone to slaughter in the past now languish longer in pastures and are in poorer condition when rescues receive them, making it harder on rescue facilities (J. Edwards, personal communication, October 25, 2007). Jennifer Williams, Director of Blue Bonnet Equine Humane, Texas, voiced concerns over groups supporting the antislughter bill when they say the market will correct itself and then they walked away. Rescues now have to take care of the problem which she felt was very short sighted (J. Williams, personal communication, November 13, 2007). According to North et al. (2005, p.14) "if these horses are not euthanized, caring for each horse will cost rescue facilities approximately \$2,340 per year, depending on location."

Could Americans have known the fallout from the closure of the processing plants?

In a paper published in 2006 prior to the closing of all of the slaughter houses, the predictions were:

- The potential for a large number of abandoned or unwanted horses is substantial.
- Public animal rescue facilities are saturated with unwanted horses. No funding has been allocated to manage a large increase in horse that will likely become the responsibility of these facilities.
- The option of rendering equine carcasses is decreasing. Private land burial and disposal in landfills have negative impact on the environment.
- Horse owners will realize a direct impact from lower horse sale prices (Ahern et al., 2006).

In 2004, Messer indicated at that time there was not "enough volunteers, funding, or placement opportunities for all of the unwanted horses" (2004). In 2005, North et al. indicated similar results with the "value of both U.S. horses and horsemeat to decrease to some degree" and that "money would be needed to care for or dispose of unwanted horse that cannot be slaughtered and are not disposed of". The direct economic impact on the horse industry would be in the neighborhood of \$50 million annually (\$26 million in lost export revenue and \$20-\$29 million in increased disposal costs) (North et al., 2005 p. 14).

Where are the supporters of this ban at this point?

The promoters of banning the ethical harvest of horses have played on the emotions of public servants and private individuals who are not only not horse owners themselves, but have reacted and made government and state policy based on emotion with no concern for the reality of the implications of the ban. These same groups are back at the front door of the Nation's capital now asking for a ban on transporting horses to other available horse harvesting facilities within driving range of the U.S. The horses that are now transported out of the country to possibly non-regulated facilities are the ones that would have gone to U.S. regulated facilities, but are now subjected to increased travel distance and possible cruel euthanasia.

Why have the groups that supported the ban on horse processing not stepped forward to help in the unwanted horse issue? This is a very important question that needs to be answered. The Humane

Society of the United States (HSUS), one of the supporters of this ban, states it is not the responsibility of the HSUS to solve every horse issue (Steever, 2008). But should they help fix a problem that they created? Wayne Pacelle, President of the Humane Society of the United States, has stated that stories of increased numbers of horses abandoned or neglected are concocted by those that oppose the ban on horse harvesting (Pacelle, 2007). The AVMA and many other groups have stated that “the assault by the anti-horse-slaughter industry has, in fact, led to the current welfare crisis.” Mark Lutschtaunig states “The reality is, proponents of this legislation have done nothing to address the real issue here, and, in fact, by seeking to ban horse slaughter, they have made things significantly worse” (Nolen, 2008). Dr. Simon Shane reported the current lack of alternatives to humane processing will continue to result in abandonment and neglect. By demonizing regular practices in the livestock industry through misrepresentation, distortion of scientific fact, publicizing sensational and frequently fabricated and manipulated images, the opponents of food animal production appeal to the sentiments and emotions of the public and legislators. Poorly framed legislation may in fact create more suffering among animals than the alleged problems intended to be solved” (Shane, 2008). Shane goes on to say that “we should be aware of the fundamental objectives of HSUS which is to impose a vegan lifestyle on all humanity” (2008). According to Dr. Robert Lewis, DVM, there is no easy solution to this problem. Euthanasia is quite expensive and then there is the issue of carcass disposal. Cremation is very costly. So many avenues are gone now when it comes to disposing of horses including the sale barn (Lewis, 2008).

Many of the rescues are privately funded and funding is always at a premium. Therefore, some are asking why the federal government isn't providing funding to the rescues, now forced to take on more horses with escalating costs. Others have suggested the paying of breeders not to breed as many horses or paying owners to geld or ovariectomize their horses.

Conclusion

The ban on harvesting horses has put employees at the harvesting facilities out of jobs at a time when the nation is facing unemployment and recession concerns. At the same time, these groups have put tens of thousands of horses in a prime situation for neglect and abandonment. It does not take too much insight to understand if the U.S. harvest facilities remain closed and there is an attempt to stop transportation of horses across our borders the federal government will have to take on a prominent role to ensure that unwanted horses are cared for humanely. This will require money from already overspent budgets to supply patrols at the border in an attempt to stop horses from crossing. The drain on the U.S. economy will continue as other regulations and funding are required to fix the current and future situations that develop to a problem that did not exist. “If it isn't broke, don't fix it” is a statement that seems to apply to the U.S. horse harvesting situation. These facilities provided an export market for unwanted horses amounting to approximately \$26 million in value and also provided employment to U.S. citizens, both with limited government involvement. Public policy should not be based on emotional appeals, but rather on hard facts. It appears that no one read nor listened to the facts and now the facts are haunting even those who made the wrong decision.

While not the focus of this paper, questions about what the economic effect of the ban will have on the U.S. economy deserve attention (hay producers, feed mills, tack shops, and the price of horses). It is clear that persons purchasing horses will now need to consider disposal costs for the horse at the end of its useful life rather than anticipating any salvage value for the horse when it is sold. Evidence suggests that horse prices have decreased since the implementation of the ban and indicate that the negative effect of the ban on the industry is widely based.

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