

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare

Horse Slaughter – Its Ethical Impact and Subsequent Response of the Veterinary Profession

A White Paper

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Introduction

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare (VEW) is a group of veterinarians committed to equine welfare, and as such we support measures to end horse slaughter including passage of the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act (S. 727/H.R. 503). We are concerned about misinformation being transmitted to Congress and the broader public regarding horse slaughter. VEW believes that certain veterinary professional associations that are actively promoting horse slaughter are undermining our profession's integrity and the welfare of the horses we care for. In so doing these organizations, of which many of us are members, erroneously purport to speak for our entire profession. Veterinarians should put animal welfare at the top of their list of priorities, not relegate it to an also-ran concern.

Horse slaughter has never been considered by veterinary professionals to be a form of euthanasia. Congress and the general public must hear from veterinarians that horse slaughter is not and should not be equated with humane euthanasia. Rather, the slaughtering of horses is a brutal and predatory business that promotes cruelty and neglect and which claimed the lives of more than 100,000 American horses in 2008.

Given that the debate on horse slaughter is at a crucial juncture with the recent closure of the remaining domestic horse slaughter plants under state law, the surge in horses going to a grisly death in Canada and Mexico, and the opportunity currently before Congress to end the suffering of America's horses through speedy passage of the federal Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act, VEW is compelled to inject its expertise into the arena. This White Paper will, from a professional veterinary perspective, address key points on the issue of horse slaughter and in so doing will lend further credence to calls for a rapid end to this wholly brutal and un-American trade.

1. Horse Slaughter is *not* humane euthanasia

It is the united opinion of VEW that horse slaughter is inhumane, and that it is an unacceptable way to end a horse's life under any circumstance. One need only observe horse slaughter to see that it is a far cry from genuine humane euthanasia. From the transport of horses on inappropriate conveyances for long periods of time without food, water or rest to the very ugly slaughter process in which horses react with pain and fear, no evidence exists to support the claim that horse slaughter is a form of humane euthanasia. Rather, it is a brutal process that results in very tangible and easily observable equine suffering.

It is worth noting that the suffering of horses in slaughter is accentuated by the very fact that they are not raised for slaughter. Horses going to slaughter have largely been accustomed to close human contact whether through racing, ranch work, pleasure riding, rodeo or any of the other ways in which horses are used in this country. While some are purposely sold into slaughter by their owners most end up at the abattoir through pure bad luck: they were sold at auction and the winning bidder was a "killer-buyer" working for one of the slaughter plants. To suddenly be treated as pure livestock must be disorienting and frightful, and can only compound their suffering as they proceed to slaughter.

We believe that it is an unethical and dangerous practice for the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) to attempt to equate horse slaughter with humane euthanasia.

2. Transport of horses to slaughter compounds equine suffering

Despite the presence of federal regulations governing the transport of horses to slaughter,¹ horses continue to suffer immeasurably en route to slaughter. Current regulations are paltry, allowing for horses to be transported for more than 24 hours without food, water or rest. Heavily pregnant mares can be moved to slaughter, as can horses with broken limbs or who are blind in one eye. Further, the regulations only cover the final leg of the journey, so slaughter-bound horses moved from auction to feedlot, for instance, are not covered by the rule.

The much touted (by the U.S. Department of Agriculture) ban on the use of double-decker vehicles to haul horses to slaughter only came into effect in December of 2006, despite pressure from welfare advocates to implement the ban with the final rule, which went into effect in early 2002 (the “double-decker ban” was phased in so as not to unduly impact the slaughter industry financially). Further and most significantly, because the ban only applies to the final leg of the journey to slaughter as previously mentioned, haulers can still move slaughter-bound horses across the country on double-deck conveyances designed for cattle and pigs and need only switch to single-deck trailers before arriving at the slaughter plant. Loading and unloading onto the rigs is stressful and injurious as horses must immediately go either up or down a relatively steep ramp to access one of the two floors. Because the trailers are divided into two levels and thus have low ceilings, many horses are unable to stand fully upright and are forced to travel in a bent position.

Not only are double-deck trailers inhumane, they are dangerous due to their high center of gravity. Numerous heart-wrenching and lethal accidents have occurred in recent years in which double-deck trailers were carrying horses to a middle-point along the route to slaughter. The results were grisly and absolutely avoidable.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is now seeking to broaden the scope of the transport regulations to cover all legs of the journey to slaughter but it is too little too late, particularly given that the domestic horse slaughter plants have been shuttered.

3. Use of Captive-Bolt in Horse Slaughter Wholly Unacceptable

The use of the captive-bolt gun, which is commonly used in the slaughter of livestock (including horses), has been a point of great contention in the debate on horse slaughter. Because it can theoretically be used by a veterinarian - in specific circumstances - to euthanize horses, the AVMA has tried to equate its use in the slaughterhouse with humane euthanasia. To clarify, the captive-bolt gun is a mechanical method by which, in ideal circumstances, animals can be rendered immediately unconscious (not killed) through a quick blow to the brain by a metal bolt prior to actual slaughter. However, in order for the method to work as intended, the captive bolt must be administered properly. According to the AVMA’s own guidelines, the head of the animal to which the captive bolt is being applied must be restrained² or still and a highly skilled individual ought to administer the fatal blow. In the slaughterhouse none of these best case scenarios are in place: the horse is most likely panicked, its head is unrestrained, and the person administering the captive bolt is a low-paid worker who is expected to move horses through the kill line at high speed. Herein lays the controversy surrounding the use of the captive bolt in horse slaughter.

In its 2007 AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia, the AVMA rates the use of the captive bolt to euthanize horses as “acceptable”. However, it is the opinion of VEW professionals that this categorization was

¹ Commercial Transportation of Equines to Slaughter, 9 CFR Part 88,

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/animal_diseases/animal_id/9cfr88.shtml

² The AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia (formerly the 2000 Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia), 2007

based on studies conducted on species other than equine. No studies are cited in the 2007 AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia that any scientific research has ever been conducted to determine the humaneness or efficacy of the captive bolt gun for use specifically on horses.

Further review finds that within the 2007 AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia denoted reference #112-- Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), Guidelines for Humane Slaughter and Euthanasia. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 1987:64:4-7 is contradictory to the opinion of the AVA reference itself.

The Australian Veterinary Association clearly states the following:

Horses:

Abattoirs--- "An adequate caliber firearm or a humane killer may be used to render the horse unconscious for bleeding. The captive bolt pistol is not satisfactory for horses since firm pressure on the forehead is essential for its effective use and this tends to be resisted by the horse. This problem applies to a lesser extent with the humane killer".

Therefore, it is the united conclusion of VEW professionals that the captive bolt should be deemed "conditionally acceptable" and used only in emergency (non-slaughter) situations where no other option exists to humanely end a horse's suffering or when advanced circulatory dysfunction might diminish the efficiency of chemical euthanasia. Even then it must be administered properly. When used in the slaughter context it is not equitable with humane euthanasia.

4. Horses stabbed to death in Mexican slaughter plants

Recent investigations by the San Antonio News-Express³ reveal that the use of the "puntilla knife" on horses prior to slaughter is common practice in Mexican slaughter plants. Footage shows horses being repeatedly stabbed in the neck with these knives prior to slaughter. Such a barbaric practice does not render the horse unconscious, it simply paralyzes the animal. The horse is still fully conscious at the start of the slaughter process during which the animal is hung by a hind leg, its throat slit and its body butchered.

5. Unfounded claims that banning horse slaughter will lead to an increase in equine abandonment and neglect

No increase in the abandonment or neglect of horses has been documented since the closure of the three domestic slaughter plants in the earlier part of 2007. This is not unsurprising. The horse slaughter business is not providing a service for the disposal of "unwanted" horses, but rather is preying on largely healthy, marketable horses⁴ that might otherwise be used for more productive purposes. Several "news" reports surfaced in late 2007 claiming to show an increase in abandonment, but all have proven false. In fact, an article in the *Oregonian* quotes a local law enforcement officer regarding nine new cases of abandonment. When contacted the officer has denied any knowledge of the claims. A similar story in Kentucky was exposed as a hoax⁵.

In fact, when the number of horses going to slaughter declined by nearly 90 percent between the early 1990s and the early 2000s there was no correlating increase in abandoned or neglected horses.⁶ To the contrary, the temporary closure of the Cavel plant in Illinois between 2002 and 2004 resulted in a decline in equine abuse and neglect cases.⁷

³ <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/mexico/stories/MYSA093007.01A.horseslaughter.3496288.html>

⁴ "A survey of the condition of horses arriving at two Texas slaughter plants indicated that 92.3 percent arrived in good condition,..." *Guidelines for Handling and Transporting Equines to Slaughter* by Temple Grandin, Ph.D. in *Guidebook for USDA's Slaughter Horse Transport Program* issued December 2001.

⁵ No Abandoned Horses Found; Representative Ed Whitfield, *Florida Times-Union*.

⁶ *Horse Illustrated* - July 2002 quoting Carolyn Stull, Ph.D., animal welfare specialist at the Veterinary Medical Extension at the University of California, Davis on the 1998 California ballot ban of horse slaughter. "Stull also notes that there has been no

6. Horse slaughter does not provide a humane service for “unwanted” horses

The entire argument that horses that go to slaughter are unwanted is unfounded. Instead, the horse slaughter industry exists solely because a profit stands to be made in fulfilling gourmet demand in foreign countries for horseflesh. Where there is a market demand it will be supplied by market forces, in this case by unscrupulous companies and individuals who stand to profit off the slaughter of American horses. For example, when the three remaining horse slaughter plants were operating in the US, Cavel International imported horses from Canada for slaughter in order to fill their demand.

7. The promotion of genuine humane euthanasia for “unwanted” horses is absent from the repertoire of the pro-horse slaughter lobby

Proponents of horse slaughter paint the industry as a humane service by which “unwanted” horses can be disposed of. It is hard to believe that most veterinarians faced with a client who has a horse that is old, sick or otherwise no longer wanted would suggest that the horse in question should be stuck on a truck and hauled thousands of miles to slaughter. Instead, the veterinarian would most likely suggest truly humane euthanasia via chemical injection, after which the carcass can be buried, incinerated, sent to landfill or rendered.⁸ The absolute absence of the subject of actual humane euthanasia from the agenda of the pro-horse slaughter lobby on Capitol Hill, including the AVMA, is stunning and telling.

Yet while the AVMA’s contention that horse slaughter is a form of humane euthanasia is used on Capitol Hill by slaughter proponents to block passage of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act, the AVMA does not even advocate slaughter as a form of euthanasia to the general public. To point, the association’s brochure on equine euthanasia, (*“How do I know it is time?: Equine Euthanasia”*), speaks only of veterinarian-administered euthanasia, not slaughter, and states:

“Perhaps the kindest thing you can do for a horse that is extremely ill, severely injured, lame, or dangerous is to have your veterinarian induce its death quickly and humanely through euthanasia. Your decision to have your horse euthanatized is a serious one, and is seldom easy to make.”⁹

The AVMA and other pro-horse slaughter advocates appear to be advancing a dual message: to their clients the use of chemical euthanasia as the only option, but on Capitol Hill they advocate captive bolt as the preferred method of “euthanasia.”

8. Cost of euthanasia

The average cost of having a horse humanely euthanized by a veterinarian and their body disposed of is approximately \$225, a relative drop in the bucket compared to the monthly and overall cost of keeping a horse. It is VEW’s contention that this expense is simply a part of responsible horse ownership and one that most horse owners already bear without any reluctance.

increase in the number of horses being neglected in California as a result of the law. ‘One concern when the law passed was that there might be an increase in neglected or starved horses,’ she says. ‘This has not been the case.’”

⁷ In 2002, the Illinois based Hooved Animal Humane Society (HAHS) received 262 complaints of potential hooved animal (primarily equine) abuse and neglect in the state of Illinois. As of December 23, The Society has received 165 complaints for the year 2003.-- HAHS testimony to Illinois General Assembly in 2003.

⁸ <http://www.vetsforequinewelfare.org/facts.php>

⁹ *“How do I know it is time?: Equine Euthanasia”* April 2005,

http://www.avma.org/communications/brochures/euthanasia/equine/equine_euth_brochure.asp

9. Proper disposal of horse carcasses no longer slaughtered

Pro-horse slaughter organizations have argued that an end to horse slaughter and the supposed need to dispose of an estimated 100,000 horses each year will result in environmental damage. This argument is flawed on two fronts.

First, it is assumed that all horses currently going to slaughter would need to be disposed of by some other method if horse slaughter were prohibited. As stated earlier most horses going to slaughter are in good condition and are marketable for other purposes¹⁰. Even assuming all horses currently going to slaughter would need to be mortally disposed of, the impact would be insignificant. A generally accepted rate of mortality among livestock in a given year is 5 - 10%. Therefore, based on the 9.2 million horses currently in the US, 460,000 - 920,000 die naturally or are euthanized each year without notable impact. On the face of this situation, another 1% or 100,000 horses will make no significant impact.

Secondly and an even more compelling in dismissing this argument is the fact that in the overall picture of livestock disposal, horses aren't even a blip on the screen. According to a study commissioned by the National Renderers Association¹¹ in which no mention of horses was made, almost 3.5 billion pounds of livestock and poultry mortalities were reported in 2000. During that same year, the US based horse slaughter facilities slaughtered 47,134 horses. Had all of these horses been disposed of by non-slaughter methods resulting in the need to dispose of approximately 47,134,000 pounds of matter (based on an average weight per horse of 1,000 pounds), this would have represented a measly 1.3% increase in the total livestock and poultry mortalities that year.

Conclusion

Horse slaughter is not a form of humane euthanasia, nor is it a "necessary evil". The horse slaughter industry is a predatory one that exists only because there is a profit to be made by fulfilling consumer demand in overseas markets for horse flesh. Rather than aiding horse welfare, as slaughter proponents contend, horse slaughter results in very tangible animal cruelty and suffering while engendering abuse and neglect. Currently, horse owners have a choice of what to do at the end of their horse's life - pay to do the right thing or be paid to do the wrong thing. In promoting horse slaughter as a form of humane euthanasia, professional veterinary associations do a disservice to the animals they are meant to care for. For these reasons, VEW supports an end to horse slaughter and advocates quick passage of The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (S. 311/H.R. 503).

¹⁰ Senate Report 110-229, "TO AMEND THE HORSE PROTECTION ACT REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION on S. 311," November 14, 2007, [http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/R?cp110:FLD010:@1\(sr229\)](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/R?cp110:FLD010:@1(sr229))

¹¹ Livestock Mortalities: Methods of Disposal and Their Potential Cost - March 2002, National Renderers Association, http://www.renderers.org/Economic_Impact/MortalitiesFinal.pdf

About VEW:

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare (VEW) was created by a group of veterinarians from all disciplines who are concerned about misinformation being transmitted to the public regarding the national debate on horse slaughter. We believe that our profession's integrity is being undermined by the hard line stance of a few misinformed individuals whose opinions have been swayed by unfounded logistical concerns as opposed to what should be a primary concern for animal welfare. Veterinarians should put animal welfare at the top of their priorities, not relegate it to an also-ran concern.

We developed www.vetsforequinewelfare.org as a resource to educate other veterinarians, animal health professionals and horse owners about the options available for day-to-day proper treatment of horses, and to provide humane information and options to those who can no longer care for (or must end the lives of) their horses. The website is also a forum to inform other veterinarians, horse owners, politicians and the American public about the truth behind horse slaughter.

Horse slaughter has never been considered a legitimate form of euthanasia by veterinary professionals or organizations, and we are disturbed by the fact that a few pro-horse slaughter political associations are distorting this message. Congress must hear from veterinary professionals that horse slaughter is not and should not be equated with humane euthanasia.

VEW was developed by veterinarians, who have consulted with representatives of the horse industry, the field of equine rescue and the humane community throughout the development of the organization and this VEW website to ensure that we are responsive to their concerns. We have listened to those who work with horses every day and try to improve equine welfare as a profession, with the goal of facilitating a dialog that will strengthen our ability to improve the life-quality of all horses. Sadly, it has been common practice in the veterinary profession to marginalize animal welfare advocates but the veterinarians involved in VEW believe that it is time for a change. In the absence of dialog on these issues, no one, especially the horses, benefit.