

# **From Untamed Spirit to Packaged Flesh: The Problem of Horse Slaughter in North America**

**By Valerie Feerer**

Horses have accompanied humans through history for centuries. They have been our friends, partners in work and war, and main mode of transportation until cars overtook the world. From their furry coats to their capacity for breathtaking speed, it's no wonder that equines appeal so to humans. Today horses can be seen in Olympic competitions, plowing a field, serving as police horses, reenacting a battle scene, helping people with disabilities at therapeutic riding centers, or simply living their lives wild and free. Ironically, the horse's immense popularity led to the creation of slaughter houses to make the most out of a horse's body even after they were no longer deemed useful alive. Many people believe there is a more humane way to deal with unwanted horses, and through steady progress, activists are gradually reducing the number of horses who suffer from this appalling death. However, the foremost problem with horse slaughter is the heartless method in which the horses are brutally transported, treated, and finally killed; as American people, we need to spread awareness about this problem and fight to save horses from this unnecessary evil.

One of the first steps taken to protect horses was in 1971 when Congress recognized mustangs as “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West, which continue to contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people” (“The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971”). This was a phenomenal achievement in recognizing America's wild horses because before this, the horses, like most animals in that time, were viewed as inferior species that didn't require attention from a human society intensely focused on their own needs and desires. This statement was the essence of the “Wild Free-roaming Horses and Burros Act” (also called the “Horse Protection Act”) which was

passed largely due to the activist work of Velma Bronn Johnson in the 1950's. This passionate woman took actions such as organizing a children's letter writing campaign, which helped convince the U.S. Government that wild horses needed help to survive ("American horse Slaughter Prevention Act"). The Wild Free-roaming Horses and Burros Act legally protected wild horses from the capture, branding, harassment, and death from humans that had been occurring since the 1930's ("The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971"). However, this act said nothing about domesticated horses, which were also subjected to cruelty from humans, though this fact was widely hidden from public knowledge.

The general population thought wild horses to now be adequately protected, and so there was a lull in wild horse activism until unexpectedly, in December of 2004, Senator Conrad Burns included a rider to a 2005 appropriations bill that made it legal "to sell at any price and without restriction horses that are 10 years old or older or have been unsuccessfully offered for adoption three times" (Barringer 1). This skyrocketed the number of horses and burros that went up for sale for anyone to buy, enticing slaughter houses to cheaply buy and kill them to send overseas to satisfy the international demand for horse meat. There were three slaughter houses in the U.S.-- two in Texas and one in Illinois. In 2005 and 2006, several legislative actions were taken to reduce the impact of Senator Conrad Burns' actions, but nothing physically went through and reduced the plethora of horses being slaughtered. Then, in March of 2007, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia decided that horse slaughter plants could no longer pay the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for health inspections ("Horse Slaughter"). Since the USDA didn't let inspectors work at the slaughter houses, this stopped the slaughter of horses for human consumption in the United States. In June of 2007, the last slaughter house, which was in Illinois, requested to remain open, but was denied the request, and completely closed down on September 21 when the state of Illinois ruled that "banning horse slaughter for human

consumption is constitutional” (“Illinois Ruling Stops Horse Slaughter in the U.S.”) This last slaughter house, which was called Cavel and was Belgian-owned, filed a federal lawsuit, but was eventually forced to close permanently (“Horse Slaughter”).

Today, the problem of horse slaughter is worse than ever before. The lingering issue, resulting from the closure of the three horse slaughter plants in the U.S., is that now horses are being transported far greater distances to both Canada and Mexico. Not only is slaughter completely legal there, but there are also fewer regulations about how horses must be treated. This needs to be put to a halt because now horses have even longer grueling journeys to survive on the way to the slaughter house. It is common for horses to die from lack of food, water, and comfort during the miles they are coped up in a trailer on the way to the slaughter plant (“Horse Slaughter”). And there are the smaller other concerns such as the time, money, and gas wasted on transporting an animal just to be killed. No matter what way it is looked at, slaughter is not a beneficial long-term solution to any involved. To address this concern, recently the “American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act” has been considered by committees in Congress. The purpose of this act, if passed, would be to “to prohibit the shipping, transporting, moving, delivering, receiving, possessing, purchasing, selling, or donation of horses and other equines to be slaughtered for human consumption, and for other purposes” (“House Bill Introduced to Protect Horses from Slaughter”). Specifically, it would ensure that the act of transporting horses bound for slaughter to other countries would no longer be legal. Some organizations believe that even if The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act passed, it would be hard to keep people from transporting horses over boarder to slaughter regardless of the federal law (“Horse Slaughter”). However they fail to realize that the circumstances certainly couldn't get worse if the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act was passed, and even if it didn't prevent horses from being transported over borders, it has the potential to reduce the numbers significantly. It is horse

activist's prominent legislative hope at the moment, and therefore should be heavily supported by those opposing slaughter.

One of the most pressing problems with horse slaughter is the way perfectly healthy horses go from being in a safe home to a nightmare of a processing plant. According to a study by Temple Grandin, “70% of all horses at the slaughter plant were in good, fat, or obese condition; 72% were considered to be “sound” of limb; 84% were of average age; and 96% had no behavioral issues” (“Slaughter FAQ”). The majority of horses that become slaughtered are bought from auctions by “killer-buyers” who's job is to find and bring back as many horses as possible to slaughter (“American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act”). The public needs to be educated about the circumstances in which horses start on the road to slaughter because often someone can recognize a horse and save it before it is too late. Unfortunately, some horses end up in slaughter from irresponsible owners who care more about receiving a little cash than they do for their horse. In these cases the owners are almost too educated about horse slaughter—they know how to cleverly get cash while disposing of their unwanted animal. Although we cannot do much to change these owner's opinions, what we can do is expose the cruelties of horse slaughter out in the open so that people can judge for themselves the horrors horses go through.

Contrary to popular belief, the most urgent ethical problem of treating horses occurs not at slaughter plants but in the vehicles that transport the doomed animals. According to the paper “Horse Slaughter in America,” “The majority of horses are transported in vehicles that are not equipped for safe travel, and they may suffer broken bones, deep lacerations, missing eyes, or be trampled and killed”. It is simply not ethical to treat any being in this manner, especially since horses have aided humans throughout history. They should be loved, respected, and cherished—not thrown away like a worthless object. The transport of horses is regulated by the federal government; however, currently it's legal to subject horses to conditions that many would

consider to be abusive. It is permissible to move horses in low double-decked cattle trailers, in some of which the ceilings are so low-lying that horses heads become injured, and also slaughter-transporters are not required to separate the mare and foals from the stallions. Besides creating physical tension for the horses, this impacts the horses mental capacity since the mares and stallions will be continually attracted to each other within the constraints of a trailer, which leads to the potential for massive injuries. Finally, even more shocking, it's totally valid to leave horses for up to 24 hours without food, water, or any kind of rest (“American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act”).

The cruelty intensifies when the horses arrive at the slaughter plant. They are forced out of the trailer by employees who beat them with fiberglass rods or electric prods to make them go into the kill boxes. At this point, the horses become very panicked, as they can smell blood and are oppressively overcrowded. Supporters of banning horse slaughter need to remember that another option to help horses is to improve the conditions in the slaughter plant. Although we might not be able to prevent horses from being slaughtered, we can certainly improve their last moments by providing a calm and quiet environment at least up until they are isolated to be killed. When it comes time for the horse to be killed, they are shot repeatedly in the head with a captive bolt stunner (“Horse Slaughter”). Essentially, they are filled with excruciating pain as a metal rod is driven into their brain. By federal law, “horses must be rendered unconscious prior to slaughter” (“Horse Slaughter”). But the captive bolt stunner is meant to only knock out the horses, and not kill them. There must be a change of the device used to slaughter horses; because the captive bolt stunner is essentially a torture device, and humans have nothing of value to gain from slowly killing a horse—a quick death is much better, and saves time additionally.

The main issue with horse slaughter is that it is more inhumane than any other type of animal slaughter all due to the use of the captive bolt stunner to draw the life away from horses.

The horses are still alive when the next stage occurs—the part where horses are bled out. They have their throats slit while being hung up by a rear leg, as this gets rid of all the blood, and most people fail to realize that some horses are still conscious at this point. There should be much more careful observation on the horses behalf in order to make sure that it is totally dead before the next steps of the process occur. Unfortunately, this does not happen due to financial reasons that seem to be more important than the horses well-being. The horses are then butchered, and so they become horse meat, and later they are processed and packaged to ship to other countries (“Horse Slaughter”). Somewhere within this process the unfortunate horses shift from overwhelming pain to leaving their body behind, and traumatically die as their body becomes wrecked.

Horse meat, in addition to uses in other countries, used to be fed to animals in zoos in the U.S., but that practice has supposedly been stopped, and horse meat is usually not eaten here by humans. The problem is, the people who eat horse meat generally believe it has humane origins. If, through spreading the word about the horse slaughter process, we could get consumers of horse meat to boycott it, this could be yet another solution to the problem of horse slaughter—because if international countries won't buy horse meat, there will be much less of a reason for horses to be slaughtered in the first place.

According to a survey given to New York State residents, “91% considered horses companions, recreational or sporting animals, 72% would never eat horse meat, 73% believed that the manner that horses are slaughtered is cruel and inhumane, [and] 81% personally opposed the practice of horse slaughter” (“Slaughter as a Solution”). This survey shows that since the majority of Americans are against horse slaughter, if we united to form single voice opposing it, we would be a powerful force indeed. There are already over 500 organizations, such as the Animal Welfare Institute and the The Humane Society of America that oppose the slaughtering

of horses, as well as many horse rescue groups. Conversely, there are also 200 organizations, like the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP), who oppose the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act, for various reasons, but are still concerned for the welfare of the horses involved. Finally, there are animal agriculture organizations that are solely concerned with their industries, and believe that banning horses for slaughter will endanger their practices (“Horse Slaughter”). In order to be most effective, any methods of informing the public about the drawbacks of horse slaughter should be concentrated on those people who are familiar with horses (not just horse owners). This is because horse owners are more likely to ignore the slaughter of horses, because since they own a horse, they may think they know everything about horses and not listen to another point of view, especially if it is coming from someone with no real-life horse experience, who is just “against animal cruelty.” They may think the practical and financial sides of horse ownership are being forsaken in place of weaker emotional ties.

Despite the range of opposing viewpoints on horse slaughter, if the number of unwanted horses can be reduced, there will be less of an issue all around—a decrease of horse cruelty transportation cases, fewer horses becoming slaughtered, and more happier, healthier horses in general. Even if the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act doesn't realistically stop all horses from being transported to other countries for slaughter, it is a step in the right direction and would certainly prevent some horses from abuse. Thus, the best way to cure the problem is first and foremost prevention—decreasing the number of horses who get stolen or are sold in auctions. This includes promoting the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act by informing the public about horse slaughter, having people sign petitions, and writing letters to Congress about one's views on the issue. To reduce the number of horses stolen to be taken to slaughter houses, place locks on all gates to barns, pastures, and other areas where horses live. Watch for

unusual activity, and if a horse is stolen, report it immediately to both local and state organizations, such as Stolen Horses International (“Protect Your Horse From Being Lost or Stolen”). Never sell a horse at an auction; there are plenty other ways in which to treat an unwanted horse—like leasing it to a trusted friend, or donating it to a admirable charity such as a therapeutic riding program. Yet another option is to give the horse to a rescue organization, where it will be well taken care of until the end of its days.

According to the article “Horse Slaughter in America,” “With veterinary-induced euthanasia the horse is treated gently (3).” Euthanasia is an option, and as a last resort, it is a lot more peaceful for the horses than the terror at slaughter houses. Unlike at a slaughter house, if the horse is reacting too violently from an injury to safely administer the euthanasia solution into a vein, an anesthetic drug is injected into the muscle. An IV needle is inserted into the vein, and the horse tranquilly drifts away, often surrounded by sympathetic people (“Horse Slaughter in America”). In contrast, in a slaughter house, the horse stands in a small box stall in the shadow of hundreds of other unfortunate equines who met their deaths in that same space.

On every level—physically, mentally, and emotionally, each horse that becomes slaughtered experiences a profound betrayal by the humans who have been their partners throughout history. They gave us transportation—and we take away their ability to walk by killing them. We won wars mounted upon a trusted steed—and now we destroy their will to fight. In riding a horse, we experience freedom—yet we capture and beat them into “kill-boxes.” Horses are living, breathing, feeling, experiencing beings, and we have no right to treat them as disposable meat, like we have in the past. The only way to prevent more injustice from happening is to take action now, before more horses die. As horses have assisted us throughout history, it is now our time to return the favor and help them.

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