

HORSE SLAUGHTER



ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE



BETRAYING OUR EQUINE ALLY

Horses have served humans throughout history, carrying us on their backs, tilling our fields, drawing wagons and carriages, and enriching our lives as friends and companions. In the United States, horses have never been raised for human consumption, and there is no demand for horsemeat among American consumers.

Nonetheless, into the early 21st century, a few foreign-owned horse slaughterhouses continued to operate in the United States, exporting the meat to Europe and Asia. In 2007, however, a federal court upheld a long-standing (but previously unenforced) Texas law banning horse slaughter,

and Illinois enacted a law banning horse slaughter. As a result, horse slaughter ceased at the three remaining US facilities that slaughtered equines—Beltex and Dallas Crown in Texas and Cavel International in Illinois.

By this time, Congress had also begun to include provisions in annual spending bills barring the use of federal funds to inspect horse slaughter facilities—the first coming in fiscal year 2006. Withholding federal inspection essentially establishes a de facto nationwide ban on domestic horse slaughter, because uninspected meat cannot be sold commercially. Spending provisions must be renewed every year, however, making it precarious to rely on them long-term to prevent a resumption of horse slaughter in the United States. In fact, when the provision lapsed in fiscal year 2012, facilities in New Mexico, Iowa, and Missouri sought and received permits from the US Department of Agriculture to begin slaughtering horses. Court challenges prevented the companies from following through before the appropriations provision was reinstated for fiscal year 2014. (It has been renewed every year since.)

Meanwhile, the killing of American horses continues. For decades, American horses have been shipped across the border to Canada and Mexico, where they are typically slaughtered under inhumane conditions. From 2008 through 2023, over 1.4 million American horses suffered this fate. And while numbers have declined dramatically in recent years, tens of thousands of American horses continue to enter the slaughter pipeline each year to serve the European and Asian markets.

Wild horses have also fallen victim to this pipeline. The Bureau of Land Management continues to round up and remove wild horses from the range at an alarming rate. Although the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 prohibited slaughter of wild equines, such protections were nullified after Senator Conrad Burns (R-MT) succeeded in attaching a backdoor rider to a 2004 omnibus bill that allowed “excess” wild horses to be sold “without limitation”

on slaughter. Thus far, annual appropriations provisions banning “destruction” of these animals for “commercial purposes” have prevented this rider from taking full effect. As with the de facto ban on horse slaughter, reliance on this stop-gap measure that must be renewed year after year is far from ideal.

Meanwhile, numerous wild horses still slip through the cracks. Through various incentive programs, the BLM has sought to sell or adopt out captive wild horses to private individuals. In 2015, a Department of the Interior Office of Inspector General investigation confirmed that a rancher who purchased 1,794 wild horses and burros from the BLM had sold them at great profit to slaughter in Mexico. And a 2021 *New York Times* exposé detailed how some wild horses acquired through the BLM’s Adoption Incentive Program—whereby individuals receive cash payments to adopt captive wild horses—were subsequently sold to slaughter.

Passage of the Save America’s Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act, federal legislation to prohibit the slaughter of horses in the United States for human consumption, as well as the export of horses for the same purpose, would finally shut down this inhumane industry and trade that has claimed the lives of millions of American horses in the last few decades.



Horse transportation laws are so weak that, even after a man hauling 19 horses to slaughter was charged with animal cruelty, the USDA failed to take action. Just after this photo was taken, the horses were slaughtered.

A BRUTAL DEATH

Although awareness of the issue has grown exponentially since AWI began its national campaign against horse slaughter, the realities of the horsemeat trade are still largely hidden from most Americans. Most horses sent to slaughter in Canada and Mexico are purchased at livestock auctions by “kill buyers” contracted to supply horses to the foreign slaughterhouses. Kill buyers tend to operate in the shadows, and the intermediate feedlots where slaughter-bound horses are often held are rarely seen by the public. The entire industry has long benefitted from being out of sight and out of mind. As the operations manager of a Canadian horse slaughterhouse told the *Edmonton Journal* in 2001, “Talking about horses is kind of a scary thing, especially in the West, where people think it’s more of a pet than protein. Every time we say anything about horses in the paper, there’s always an uproar. So I don’t want to talk about it.” But undercover footage and records obtained via the Freedom of Information Act have revealed the appalling conditions



that horses endure during transport to and upon arrival at the slaughterhouse.

The suffering begins long before horses even reach the slaughterhouse. Horses are crammed into crowded trailers, hauled incredibly long distances, and deprived of food, water, and rest so the shippers can maximize their profits. Weak federal regulations governing the transport of horses to slaughter also allow the movement of horses who may be particularly likely to experience physical suffering or acute stress under such conditions (e.g., pregnant mares and horses blind in one eye). USDA records from when horse slaughter occurred domestically revealed horrific injuries that occurred during transport, including broken limbs, gaping wounds, and eyeballs hanging by a thread.

Upon arrival at the slaughterhouse, the suffering continues unabated. Horses can be left for long periods in tightly packed trailers, subjected to further extremes of heat and cold. In hot weather, their thirst is acute. Tired and panicked horses, including downed animals, may be offloaded using excessive force. Subjected to overcrowding, deafening sounds, and the smell of blood, the horses become more and more desperate, exhibiting fear typical of “flight” behavior—pacing in prance-like movements with their ears pinned back against their heads and eyes wide



open. A 2022 investigation conducted by Animal Equality at a slaughterhouse in Mexico that supplies horsemeat to countries such as Russia, China, Japan, and Vietnam found horses with USDA tags—indicating a US origin. At another slaughterhouse in the region, footage showed underweight and sick horses being beaten, workers using electric shocks to prod animals, and horses who were ineffectively stunned or rendered unconscious prior to slaughter.

Some horse slaughter proponents argue for the restoration of horse slaughter in the United States, a position that ignores the cruelty inflicted on horses who were slaughtered domestically. There is ample documentation from the USDA and private investigations to substantiate the inhumane treatment of horses at plants when they were operating in the United States. During a 2002 investigation by AWI, callous workers at one US plant were observed using fiberglass rods to poke and beat the faces, necks, backs, and legs of terrified horses as they were shoved through the facility and into the kill box. The only humane course of action is a ban on both domestic horse slaughter and the export of American horses to slaughter in other countries.

DEBUNKING THE “UNWANTED HORSE” MYTH

In recent years, horse slaughter proponents have consistently fought adoption of the SAFE Act, claiming that there is a huge “unwanted horse” population in the United States. Those who advance this unsubstantiated claim, including the American Association of Equine Practitioners, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Quarter Horse Association, and the American Farm Bureau, have lobbied Congress to block passage of the federal ban. Their premise is that slaughter improves horse welfare, offering a “humane” way to dispose of these animals—a “necessary evil” without which horses would be subjected to neglect, abandonment, and abuse.

In truth, no hard data exists to back up claims about a burgeoning population of “unwanted horses.” What is clear is that kill buyers working for the slaughterhouses are outbidding other buyers—including rescue groups—at auction because they have the financial incentive to do so. The market for slaughtered horses is set purely by foreign slaughterhouses and demand for their meat abroad, not by the number of supposedly unwanted horses in the United States.

There has not been a corresponding increase in horse neglect and abuse cases since the last US horse slaughter plants closed in 2007. Meanwhile, the number of equine rescues and sanctuaries around the country has grown. A 2019 Equine Welfare Data Collective survey counted 977 organizations in the United States that take in equines, with a daily maximum capacity of 47,194 animals. (A 2022 survey found that the number of organizations had climbed to 1,063.) Although rescues shouldn’t have to shoulder the burden, it is encouraging that there has been a rise in equine rescue facilities around the country, with many maintaining close ties with their surrounding communities in order to better assist with at-risk horses. Over 500 of these rescues and sanctuaries are members of the Homes for Horses Coalition, a national network focused on ending

equine abuse and passing a federal ban on horse slaughter due to its severe impacts on equine welfare.

Records from the USDA and Canadian authorities indicate that in 2023, 20,370 American horses were transported abroad to be killed for human consumption. Should a ban be enacted, kill buyers would no longer have an incentive—or legal means—to profit from shipping horses to slaughter. In other words, if the SAFE Act were to be signed into law, over 20,000 horses would not suddenly become unwanted or need immediate placement; many of these animals would never have been picked up by a kill buyer and funneled into the slaughter pipeline to begin with.



Individuals sending horses to slaughter may feel no need to spend money on their care in the end. Consequently, horses rescued from slaughter are often severely neglected. After some basic care and proper diet, most of these rescued horses can go on to lead healthy lives.



Horse slaughter proponents claim that slaughter helps owners dispose of old or sick horses, but slaughterhouses typically want younger, healthier animals.

The number of American horses being exported for slaughter has declined dramatically, from a high of over 166,000 in 2012 to less than 10 percent of that number a decade later. Several factors have contributed to this decrease, including a growing awareness of the issue—from inhumane treatment to food safety concerns. Horses, which are regarded as companion animals, performance animals, and working animals, are not raised to be eaten in the United States. They are not subject to the regulatory requirements that exist for food animals, and they routinely receive a wide range of medications and treatments that are banned by the Food and Drug Administration in meat due to their toxicity to humans. In 2015, the European Union implemented a moratorium on horsemeat from Mexico, citing food safety concerns. Many of the horses butchered in Mexico were, of course, sourced directly from the United States.

In 2022, over 200 veterinarians signed a letter to Congress, underscoring the myriad welfare problems associated with horse slaughter, as well as the critical “distinction between horse slaughter and euthanasia.” As the

veterinarians noted, “euthanasia involves a comparatively short and painless death; the aim is to minimize the discomfort and distress of the animals. Established methods exist to euthanize horses ... and should be utilized when the need arises.” Proponents of horse slaughter who claim it is necessary ignore the fact that trucking horses long distances to be butchered in foreign abattoirs in no way resembles humane euthanasia.

ILLEGALLY ACQUIRED HORSES

Given their long lifespans and the costs and resources needed for proper care of these large and complex animals, the average horse will likely have several owners over the course of their lifetime. Given this turnover, any horse is potentially one bad sale away from slaughter. Tragically, some horses also end up in the slaughter pipeline after being stolen or obtained under false pretenses.

The owners’ stories can be heartbreaking. Judy Taylor of Kentucky sought help in caring for her two beloved Appaloosa horses, Poco and PJ, due to her own serious health problems. At the recommendation of a friend, she contacted Lisa and Jeff Burgess. The couple agreed to take care of the animals with the understanding that, if they were unable to continue doing so, the horses would be returned to Judy. Despite this agreement, within seven days of receiving the horses, the Burgesses sold them to a known kill buyer. Soon after, Judy discovered what had happened and frantically searched for the horses. Eventually, she learned the horrifying truth—her horses had been slaughtered for their meat. Although it could not bring back her horses, Taylor did successfully sue the Burgesses. The Kentucky Court of Appeals noted, “The Burgesses’ conduct clearly rises to the level of being outrageous and intolerable in that it offends generally accepted standards of decency and morality.”

In another tragic case, a horse owner in northwest Oklahoma contacted AWI to report that her two pregnant mares were purchased by someone who in turn sold them for slaughter. “Nobody that works at the auction barn let me know who was buying,” she said. “I found out when I went to the office to ask how to notify the buyers so I could send them the breeding certificates.” When the staff hinted that no certificates would be needed, the owner suspected something might be wrong. By the time she located the buyers, the mares had already been sent to Mexico and slaughtered.

Fallon Blackwood, a former veterinary student, pleaded guilty in 2023 to 13 counts of unlawfully bringing property obtained under false pretenses from other states into Alabama. She had obtained dozens of horses from unsuspecting owners, promising them that they would be going to loving homes. Instead, they were sent to slaughter.



AWI ally and country music legend Willie Nelson greets one of the many rescued horses he has retired to his ranch in Luck, Texas.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Support the SAFE Act, which would end both the shipment of American horses for slaughter and end the threat that horse slaughter plants will reopen in the United States. Until Congress passes this or a similar bill and it is signed into law, show horses, racehorses, wild horses, burros, and family horses will all continue to fall prey to this detestable industry.

If you are a horse owner, but can no longer care for your horse, ensure that a competent and caring home or retirement farm is found (kill buyers tend to frequent livestock auctions). For those who opt to sell their horse to an individual, make sure potential buyers can provide proper references, and draw up a legally binding agreement that the horse will never be sold to slaughter. Donating, selling, or leasing your horse to a therapeutic or other reputable riding program may be an option as well. Equine rescue and sanctuary organizations in your community may help you place your horse in a safe and loving environment



(homesforhorses.org has a national directory). In worst-case scenarios, humane euthanasia by a licensed veterinarian is preferable to cruel transport and slaughter.

Report any stolen horses to local and state authorities. Likewise, if you witness an abused or abandoned horse, please report the details to your local animal control authority for further investigation. Abuse and neglect require immediate attention not only for the obvious welfare reasons, but also because these horses are at risk of being sold into slaughter by uncaring owners.

Help raise awareness concerning the issue of horse slaughter by submitting letters to the editor and opinion pieces to newspapers, equine publications, and other media outlets.

Finally, meet with your members of Congress to educate lawmakers and their staff about this issue. Congressional staff are happy to schedule meetings with constituents—whether in person, remotely, or over the phone—to discuss the issues that matter to them. Urge your representative and senators to support the SAFE Act. You can find contact information for legislators, as well as information for how to contact your local media outlets through AWI's Action Center at awionline.org/action-center.

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