

## **Update on Horse Slaughter**

Preston R. Buff, PhD; Extension Horse Specialist, Mississippi State University

The issue of horse slaughter in the United States has evoked a powerful debate among horse owners, livestock producers, animal rights organizations and Hollywood personalities. Currently there is legislation in the United States Congress to ban the slaughter of horses in the United States for human consumption. This article is not intended to “stir the pot”, but to provide factual information on an issue that is currently impacting animal agriculture.

Currently there are two bills which have been submitted for a vote in the United States Senate (S. 311) and House of Representatives (H.R. 503). Both bills are written as follows; “To amend the Horse Protection Act 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.” Senator Trent Lott from Mississippi is a co-sponsor of S.311 and Representative Gene Taylor from Mississippi is a co-sponsor of H.R. 503. As of the writing of this article, both bills are awaiting a vote.

Currently, there are no horse processing facilities in operation in the United States. In 2007 the two plants in Texas and the one in Illinois that processed horses were closed as a result of legislative action in those states. The USDA reported in 2006 that there were 138,206 American horses processed, of those 102,260 were processed under USDA guidelines in the three plants in the United States. The remainder were sent to facilities in Mexico (11,080 head) and Canada (24,866 head). A USDA report on December 20, 2007 indicated that 44,475 horses had been shipped to Mexico for processing from January 1, 2007, which was a 312 percent increase compared to 2006. Additionally, the number of horse exported to Mexico for reasons other than slaughter have doubled as well. There is concern that some of these horses are actually going to slaughter, but not reported as such to avoid U.S. transport regulations governing animal welfare. The number of horses exported for slaughter to Canada for the same period was estimated by the USDA to be 35,000, a 41 percent increase from 2006. If the current federal legislation passes then the exportation of horses for slaughter would be banned as well as slaughter of horses in the U.S.

The main group supporting this legislation is the Humane Society of the United States, which believe it is inhumane and un-American to slaughter horses. The American Veterinary Medical Association is opposed to the ban of horse slaughter and supports captive bolt euthanasia as a humane practice. Also opposed to a ban on slaughter is the American Quarter Horse Association as well as many other equine and livestock industry groups.

A video was released by the Humane Society of the United States showing an archaic slaughter process in a facility in Mexico. There are two types of slaughter facilities in Mexico; those which process horses for export to Europe and butcher shops that process horses for local consumption. The facilities where horses are processed and exported to Europe use a captive bolt or rifle shot to euthanize the animals as required by Mexican law. It is believed that most horses imported into Mexico from the United States are going to these regulated facilities.

On January 22, 2008 a bill was introduced to the South Dakota State Senate to offer state funds in the form of a loan of up to \$1 million to open a horse slaughter facility. The bill was stopped in committee on January 29, 2008 and is no longer under consideration.

A ban on horse slaughter and transportation of horses outside of the United States for this purpose removes an option for owners of horses that are no longer productive due to age or lameness. Many believe the horses that were once destined for slaughter will incur undue suffering as a result of such a ban. Some groups are citing that horse abuse and neglect cases are on the rise following the closure of the United States processing facilities. However, there is no current data indicating that these cases are increasing or that the awareness of such cases is greater. The issue with a potential ban on horse slaughter is the over 100,000 unwanted horses every year. The American Association of Equine Practitioners estimates that 2,700 new rescue facilities would be needed the first year to accommodate the thousands of horses if a ban on slaughter is imposed. The number of facilities to support the growing number of unwanted horses will need to increase every year. There is currently no government funding to support horse rescue and retirement and without this it is unlikely that the appropriate number of facilities will be available. Euthanasia and carcass disposal can run as much as \$400, which is more than some horse owners are willing to pay. In Mississippi horses can be euthanized and buried or incinerated at the State laboratory in Pearl or Mississippi State University, College of Veterinary Medicine. Contact the Mississippi Board of Animal Health prior to disposal of horse carcasses to ensure you are following proper guidelines for disposal (1-888-722-3106).

Currently no one is sure what will become of all of the unwanted horses in the United States if these bills become law. The Unwanted Horse Coalition was formed to reduce the number of unwanted horses and to improve their welfare through education and the efforts of organizations committed to the health, safety, and responsible care and disposition of these horses. For more information visit their website: [www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org](http://www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org).

To express your opinion on the potential ban of horse slaughter, contact your Senators and Representatives. The website to find your officials is: [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org).