

Dealing in Horse Flesh

Calgary is an international source of equine meat.

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Just ate a horse meat pie. Â– The Rolling Stones, "Bitch"

Calgary and horse meat. It's a connection that one group of animal-rights activists wants you to know a lot more about, while the operator of Canada's biggest supplier of horse meat, with its headquarters in Calgary, would rather just keep things quiet.

"We want to end the slaughter of horses in Canada," says Sinikka Crosland, a Vancouver-based activist with The Responsible Animal Care Society (TRACS). "We plan to introduce a private members bill in the House of Commons in the new year to stop the practice. People have a bond with horses."

Although many of us don't realize it, horse meat from Canadian slaughterhouses is being exported across the world. According to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, in 2003, more than 6,000 tonnes of horse meat was exported to parts of Europe and Asia, where it is considered a delicacy.

Crosland and members of TRACS are highly critical of the horse meat industry, which they claim abuses animals for the sake of a meal.

"These horses are held in pens and watch other horses being slaughtered," says Crosland. "They are frightened beyond belief."

The horse-meat industry, which has been described as "hidden" because of its low profile in Canada, is at odds with TRACS, which conducts "horse rescues" in an effort to save some of the estimated 20,000-plus horses that are slaughtered in Canada each year. A rescue amounts to a small number of horses being purchased at auctions and then moved to foster homes until they are adopted by individuals who will take care of them for the duration of their natural lives.

"The last two rescues were horses from meat pens in Alberta," says Crosland. "There were some really nice horses."

A meat pen is the term Crosland and other members of TRACS use to describe feedlots where horses are fattened up before being sold at auction. The animals that are slaughtered can be former race horses, saddle horses and strays, but traditionally the majority of them have been connected to the pharmaceutical industry. The American pharmaceutical manufacturer Wyeth, previously known as Wyeth-Ayerst, used pregnant mare urine (PMU) to produce hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to relieve the symptoms of female menopause.

The demand for PMU used in the production of the medications prescribed under the trade names Premarin and Prempro created a situation where the mares' unwanted foals ended up being auctioned off to feedlots and eventually slaughtered to satisfy the appetites of Asian and European diners.

In 2002, the market for Premarin suffered a blow after a study by the Women's Health Initiative in the U.S. was made public. It reported that women being prescribed Premarin were more likely to suffer a heart attack, dementia, breast cancer and blood clots. The sudden drop in Premarin sales coupled with the development of several lower-dose versions of HRT drugs led Wyeth Pharmaceuticals to cancel its contracts with thousands of farmers in the U.S. and Canada that had been enlisted to keep mares for their

urine. Today, TRACS says many of those unwanted horses continue to be auctioned off and then purchased by operators of slaughterhouses.

"The (farmers) went from being in the PMU industry to being horse breeders," says Crosland. "The PMU industry is still responsible for many unwanted horses."

To address the issue, Wyeth has set up a \$3.7-million US fund to help find homes for thousands of unwanted horses—a move that critics say is more about public relations than genuine help from a company that has generated billions of dollars in revenue from Premarin since the drug was first introduced in the 1940s.

In Canada, one of the key players in the horse-meat industry is Claude Bouvry. The France-born businessman who owns Bouvry Exports Calgary Ltd., which includes offices in Calgary, a slaughterhouse in Fort Macleod and a feedlot in Shelby, Montana, has been in the horse-meat industry for 30 years. Bouvry ships his product by air cargo and sea to Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, Switzerland and even Montreal.

"I don't really enjoy that," says Bouvry when contacted for an interview to discuss his business. "It's not easy."

Although Bouvry refuses to comment on the number of horses his company slaughters at the Fort Macleod plant, he confirms it processes "two million (100-gram) servings every week."

The supply of horses for the Bouvry slaughterhouse is from his Shelby, Montana feedlot, located 165 kilometres away from Fort Macleod, where nearly 1,000 horses are kept at any given time waiting to be transported across the U.S.-Canada border into Alberta.

Another topic Bouvry refuses to discuss is the conviction of The Bar S feedlot (owned by his company) on five counts of animal cruelty. The October 2003 conviction stems from an investigation launched by state livestock inspectors in Toole County, Montana. They found an estimated 35 to 40 horses rotting in wet manure at The Bar S, 10 days after a torrential rain storm had hit the area in June 2002.

Records kept by state livestock inspectors had documented concerns at the Bar S for six years prior to the incident, including more than 2,000 horses being crowded into a 1.2-hectare lot and newborn colts being trampled to death.

Under the terms of a plea bargain agreement with the Toole County Attorney, The Bar S feedlot agreed to pay a \$500 fine and operate under probation for two years. The terms of the probation order include The Bar S maintaining standards set by the U.S. Department of Livestock, correcting any problems noted by livestock inspectors within 30 days, and committing no further violations of Montana's livestock laws.

Despite the convictions in Montana and the threat of legislation to stop his business in Canada, Bouvry says he is determined to continue exporting horse meat.

"It's nice they like animals," he says about the animal-rights activists. "But there are 400-million servings of horse meat eaten every week in the world. You can't just take that away."

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