

Prices Soaring for Unwanted Horses

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The auctions call them "loose" horses because they are run through the auction ring without riders and are sold mostly to "killer buyers".

Slaughter advocates including the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) call them "unwanted" horses because they clog up the market for new foals and new registration fees. But whatever you call them, they are suddenly in increasingly short supply.

The last three horse slaughter plants in the United States were closed in 2007, but the industry quickly shifted to exporting the horses for slaughter in Canada and Mexico. By the middle of 2008, there were more horse slaughter houses killing American horses than at any time in the past decade. Yet the closings galvanized the meat packing industry which saw them as a dangerous victory for "animal rights advocates" and their perceived "vegan agenda".

Within weeks of the first closings, countless anecdotal stories began appearing about how America is awash in unwanted horses. Lawmakers in almost a dozen agricultural states have put forward initiatives aimed at bringing slaughter back to the US, based largely on these accounts. But the actual sales statistics from the horse auctions tell a very different story.

For example the New Holland auction in Pennsylvania is one of the largest slaughter auctions in the country. In October of 2008, they sold a total of 815 slaughter grade horses at an average price of \$US323, but despite rapidly worsening economic conditions, by February that number had dropped by 28% to 582 horses and the average price had risen by 31.6% to \$US425. It is largely the same story at auctions across the country.

Leroy Baker, owner of the Sugar Creek Auction in Ohio, has been heard publicly assigning the shortage of sellers to bad publicity, including an HBO documentary about race horses going to slaughter through his auction.

Moreover, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently fined Baker an unprecedented \$US162,800 for numerous violations of the Commercial Transport of Equines to Slaughter Act (CTESA). The act prohibits the transport to slaughter of late term pregnant mares, foals, blind horses and horses that cannot support their weight on all four legs; prohibits the use of double deck trailers; and specifies minimal rest and feeding intervals.

And Baker has not been the only source of bad publicity for the horse slaughter industry. In response to a Freedom of Information Act request, the USDA recently disclosed 900 pages of photos documenting some of the grisliest violations imaginable that occurred at the Texas slaughter plants prior to their being ordered closed in 2007.

The photos, which were taken in an attempt to enforce compliance with the CTESA, show horses with horrific injuries ranging from severed legs to crushed skulls. Still other photos show blind horses, newborn foals and even a mare standing on the unloading docks with her placenta still draping to the manure-covered floor.

A young foal awaits his fate. Picture by the US Department of Agriculture, from www.kaufmanzoning.net USDA photos show horses with horrific injuries ranging from severed legs to crushed skulls. Other photos show blind horses, newborn foals and even a mare standing on the unloading docks with her placenta still draping to the manure-covered floor. The exposure of these photos was a double embarrassment to the

American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA). The evidence surfaced just as the AVMA was getting traction on a well financed PR campaign to convince lawmakers that the US plants should be reopened because they had been more humane.

Every indication is that the supply of unwanted horses will only get worse because production has been destroyed. The reason for this lies in the nature of the source of slaughter horses.

Contrary to popular perception, most horses sent to slaughter are not old, but young and healthy. They are largely the "culls" from an industry that over breeds in a quest for perfection. When times are good, the profits are made on the best foals and the culls (be they slow race horses or simply horses of the wrong colour) are dumped to slaughter.

But the market for top grade riding and performance horses has tanked, once again proving the old adage, "The best way to make a small fortune in horses is to start with a large one". So breeders have cut back. With less breeding there are fewer culls.

Some breeders liquidated in response to the low horse prices and high feed prices, while still others were forced out of the business when their properties were lost to foreclosure.

A Kentucky breeder, for example, gave away his entire prized Arab bloodline to keep the horses from going to slaughter.

And the "kill auctions" are losing yet another source of horses. Slammed by bad publicity, an increasing number of horse tracks have put in place "zero tolerance" programmes that ban owners and trainers caught selling their horses to slaughter.

In October, the Magna Entertainment Corporation announced that all nine of their tracks would have a zero tolerance policy and they were quickly joined by at least three other tracks.

Kill buyers have adapted to the shortage in a number of ways, including placing ads on sites such as Craig's List. In one memorable case, a kill buyer and his wife showed up at the seller's house saying they thought the horse would be a perfect starter horse for their young daughter. The horse was a thoroughbred (racing) stallion.

But there remains one possible reservoir of unwanted horses. Since the first plants were closed in Texas, there have been countless unsubstantiated stories about horses being abandoned. Some slaughter advocates have estimated that as many as 170,000 such horses were abandoned just last year. This valuable pool of unwanted horses could serve as a kind of "petroleum reserve" for the horse slaughter industry if only they could be found. And for that matter, there are always the unicorns.

John Holland is a freelance writer and the author of three books. He frequently writes on the subject of horse slaughter from his small farm in the mountains of Virginia, where he lives with his wife, Sheilah, and their 12 equines. Holland is a charter member of the Equine Welfare Alliance and serves as senior analyst for Americans Against Horse Slaughter, an organization composed entirely of volunteers.