

TESTIMONY OF

Bonnie V. Beaver, DVM, MS, Diplomate ACVB
Past President
American Veterinary Medical Association

Concerning the
American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act
H.R. 503

Before the
Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection
Committee on Energy and Commerce

July 25, 2006

Summary of Testimony

- The AVMA opposes HR 503, The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act.
- HR 503 fails to adequately address the unintended consequences of imposing a ban on the processing of horses.
- The Penetrating Captive Bolt Gun causes instantaneous death and is an acceptable form of euthanasia for horses.
- Transportation of Horses to Slaughter is highly regulated by the USDA. The transportation guidelines were developed with input from the AVMA, AAEP, other horse groups, the Humane Society of the United States, and other animal protection groups.
- Welfare is the biggest concern of the AVMA for those horses that would be impacted by a ban on horse slaughter.
- There are not enough rescue and retirement facilities, and these facilities are not regulated so there is no way to ensure that the horses would get adequate care.
- The legislation does not address the financial support required to care for the horses given up by their owners.
- The legislation does not address the disposal of over 90,000 horse carcasses if horse slaughter is banned.

Distinguished Members of Congress, my name is Bonnie Beaver and I am a past president of the American Veterinary Medical Association. I am here to explain why the AVMA opposes HR 503 – The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act.

I have provided you with my professional credentials, but I also want to briefly mention my involvement with horses. As a child, Roy Rogers was my hero and I named my first horse Trigger. Horses were my passion, and had much to do with why I became a veterinarian. They remain my passion, and that is why I am appearing before you today.

I strongly support the AVMA's opposition to HR 503 because the bill does not adequately address certain issues that are critically important to ensuring the welfare of horses that would be affected by it. We are also concerned that incorrect information has been circulated regarding what euthanasia techniques are appropriate for horses.

First, let me correct a few misconceptions regarding the handling and euthanasia of horses. The AVMA convened a panel of experts, veterinarians and scientists, which I chaired, to evaluate what was known about chemical and physical euthanasia methods. In that panel's report, a copy of which has been provided for the record, euthanasia is defined as a "humane death" in which unconsciousness is rapid and followed by the cessation of vital functions. The report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia recommends two types of euthanasia for horses—an overdose of barbiturate anesthetic and the use of a penetrating captive-bolt gun with appropriate head restraint. The penetrating captive bolt is NOT a stun gun. It causes instantaneous death due to the destruction of brain tissue. Let me repeat – instantaneous death. Statements contained in the panel's report about

the importance of appropriate head restraint do not mean that the horse's head must be completely immobilized, but instead that it should be in a position to allow skin contact with the penetrating captive-bolt gun. Involuntary movements after brain death are common in horses undergoing euthanasia, and are often misinterpreted as struggling by those without a clear understanding of the process. Although such movements may be discomforting for the people who are watching, such movements are not and should not be interpreted as an indication that a horse is experiencing distress.

It has also been incorrectly stated that horses entering restraint boxes prior to application of the penetrating captive bolt invariably panic. In fact, states of excitement or panic in horses can result in injury to both the horse and people nearby, so this is something those involved with the horse slaughter process work very hard to prevent. Instead, and as required by USDA regulations, experienced individuals handle the horse appropriately and quietly; this allows the horse to enter the restraint box without injury. Once confined, horses become passive because they recognize that their instinctive ability to flee has been thwarted.

Second, we understand that supporters of HR 503 contend that methods used to transport horses to slaughter plants are inhumane. I will take this opportunity to remind you that current USDA regulations on the transport of horses to slaughter, which we have included for the written record, were developed and implemented with significant input from the AVMA, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, other horse-related groups and humane organizations. Among the humane organizations involved were the Humane Society of the United States and several other of the advocacy groups that are currently arguing against these regulations. We have yet to receive a

satisfactory response from these groups about why they now object to the very regulations they helped draft.

Third, and foremost, the welfare of the horses that would be impacted by a ban on slaughter is the biggest concern of the AVMA. Currently, horse rescue and retirement facilities in the United States have a maximum capacity of about 6000 horses. It would be a daunting, and probably impossible, task to create facilities that could house an additional 10 times that number of horses every year. Creating these facilities and properly caring for each horse in them costs money. As shown in the Horse Welfare Coalition Fiscal Impact document, which has been included for the record, and as we have already experienced in the process of trying to manage wild Mustangs in the western United States, cumulative costs incurred for the care of a large number of horses are high. The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act does not provide the financial support required to ensure that horses given up by their owners will be adequately cared for, and inadequate funding has a huge potential to create opportunities for inadequate care. Watching a horse slowly die from starvation or disease is not only distressing, it's cruel. Furthermore, horse retirement facilities and sanctuaries are not regulated so there is no way to ensure the horses living there will receive adequate care.

Finally, disposing of the carcasses of euthanatized horses can be expensive and creates wildlife and environmental concerns. Euthanasia, carcass removal, and burial are each expensive, and cremation can cost as much as \$1500. Scavenger species can be killed by chemical agents in discarded tissues. Burial is not permitted in many areas, and chemicals can contaminate the soil. Other disposal methods, such as biodigestors, show promise but are not yet readily available.

The AVMA is concerned that HR 503, although a well-intended effort, will have serious negative consequences for the welfare of unwanted horses. The people supporting this bill fail to take into account the ramifications of its passage. They are making this into an emotionally charged issue instead of offering solutions to the problem of unwanted horses, and are potentially creating more welfare and environmental concerns in the process. We ask that you please do what is right for the horses' welfare and not support HR 503.

Thank you.