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Letter to the Editor

Dear Horseback Readers,

I feel compelled to respond to the rash of state efforts (Montana, Illinois, and North Dakota to name just a few) to re-introduce the slaughter of horses in the United States of America. As a professional economist, I find the arguments spouted nationwide to re-invite foreign owned horse killing facilities onto American soil confusing and without merit.

To paraphrase a horse rescuer I know, why is it that upon the observation of an abandoned dog or cat, people jump up and down to preserve the life of that animal, while upon the observation of an abandoned horse, some politician jumps up and down and yells that we need to slit its throat and bleed it out on American soil so that a wealthy connoisseur in Europe or Asia can have a nice horsemeat snack?

According to USDA data, approximately 20 percent more American horses are being exported to Canada and Mexico for slaughter now than were being slaughtered in the US prior to the closure of the foreign owned slaughterhouses in 2007. It is clear that the option to slaughter is readily available: you simply drop off your horse at the nearest auction or make a quick call to the local "kill buyer" and he will be dispatched through the pipeline to a foreign owned slaughter house in one of our NAFTA partners. Any abandoned horse, one would have to presume, is abandoned NOT because there are no slaughter plants in the US. To add to my confusion, there is nothing but anecdotal evidence that horses are being abandoned at a higher rate now than before the closure of the US slaughter plants, and that is because no better data exists: there is no data collected at the state or national level on horse abandonment or neglect. Even if a single year's observation were available, which it is not, it would not constitute a sample that any statistician would take seriously. And the few independent scientific studies that have been conducted over the years all illustrate the very same result: rates of horse abandonment, neglect and abuse are completely uncorrelated with the availability of local slaughter facilities.

In some of the debate concerning the proposed bills, the idea is even being perpetrated that somehow inviting foreign horse killers back on US soil is part of the solution to the severe recession currently devastating the US economy; the invitation is touted as "economic development" in, for example, Montana. A sort of bizarre economic stimulus package, for states suffering job losses. For those unaware, Americans don't eat horsemeat. The foreign owned slaughter houses formerly on US soil paid next to no taxes here. All profits were repatriated to the foreign owners in Europe. And agricultural output and employment in America represent 1.2 percent and 0.6 percent of GDP and employment respectively, tiny

fractions of aggregate economic activity, as in any industrialized nation; indeed, that is the hallmark of a mature, post-industrial, service based economy such as the United States. You aren't going to resurrect the US or your own state economy by killing 100,000 horses, an American icon, to satisfy the palette of some French or Japanese gourmand.

The agricultural and breeding interests that finance these new state political efforts want equine slaughter reintroduced on US soil because a) they fear that social and cultural rejection of equine slaughter might actually somehow induce American citizens to stop eating animals that ARE consumed as food here, b) they want to continue to breed for income and US slaughterhouses provide a more convenient venue for routine culling of the scores of less than perfect and commercially non-viable equine products of that breeding, and c) they represent the interests of a small percentage of US citizens who believe they have the right to dispose of their own animal however they choose, even if that involves a socially and culturally unacceptable act which is abhorred by over 70 percent of the US population according to any survey I have ever read.

My understanding is that optimal policy design requires that incentives be altered, if you are going to shift the allocation of economic resources away from the privately profitable but socially undesirable, and towards the socially and culturally desirable. In my opinion the only way that you will halt irresponsible and excess breeding of equines, and irresponsible ownership, is to completely eliminate the slaughter option. While the horse slaughter industry EXISTS because foreigners want to eat horsemeat, it provides an easy reward for those who want to breed as many horses as they choose and dispose of the excess in the manner that they want to, and for owners who will not take responsibility for their horse's care. Take away that reward with a federal ban on slaughter and export for slaughter, and slap a good tax on the product of any equine breeder, and the politicians currently yelling that we need to kill a bunch of horses may find it much harder to spot one that is abandoned.

We are currently being inundated with arguments that the reintroduction of equine slaughter on US soil is "necessary". The only thing it is necessary for is to fill the pockets of the big breeders and their agricultural associates, and perhaps the pockets of a "bought" politician or two. Apparently the senators and representatives of Montana who just passed a bill to introduce a new horse slaughter plant there care more about fulfilling those needs, than the fact that 85 percent of their own state citizens strongly object to the proposal. Suppose the devastated US economy *is* making it tough for horse owners and breeders to maintain for their animals in some states? Why is the solution to re-introduce a culturally and socially unacceptable practice with a horrendous USDA record of humane transportation violations? Why, instead, aren't these states considering the establishment of temporary state funded horse rescues, with jobs in them that provide tax revenue, until the economy recovers and the horses can find homes? Why aren't they providing additional funding and jobs for Humane Societies and Animal Control agencies to cope with whatever is being claimed that they are having to deal with? Why not do something that BENEFITS HORSES as well as creating some jobs? And why not impose a state tax on horse breeders to help fund it all?

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