

# Veterinarians for Equine Welfare

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April 2, 2009

Dear Representative Sacia,

On behalf of Veterinarians for Equine Welfare (VEW), a veterinary professional organization committed to equine welfare, I write to clarify our position on HB 583 and relevant issues. We support measures to end horse slaughter including passage of the federal Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act (S. 727/H.R. 503). **Further, we are strongly opposed to your legislation, HB 583, that would overturn the Illinois ban.** It is unfortunate that you do not recall my testimony before the Illinois General Assembly on behalf of the original ban. I am sorry you missed the information presented at that time. **From your recent floor debate it is clear someone has misled you in regard to the cruelty of this industry.** If you truly care about the welfare of horses, as you claimed on the floor, I urge you to not ignore these facts. If you persist, clearly you have another agenda.

VEW member veterinarians are concerned about misinformation being transmitted to your colleagues, the General Assembly and the broader public regarding horse slaughter. Horse slaughter has never been considered by veterinary professionals to be a form of euthanasia. Congress and the general public must hear from veterinarians that horse slaughter **is not** and **should not** be equated with humane euthanasia. Rather, the slaughtering of horses is a brutal and predatory business that promotes cruelty and neglect and which claimed the lives of more than 100,000 American horses in 2008.

Given that the debate on horse slaughter is at a crucial juncture with the closure of the remaining domestic horse slaughter plant under Illinois state law, the surge in horses going to a grisly death in Canada and Mexico, and the opportunity currently before Congress to end the suffering of America's horses through passage of the federal Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act, VEW is compelled to inject its expertise into the arena. Overturning the strongly supported Illinois horse slaughter ban will only add to horse suffering, and specifically, it will have no effect on export of horses from the US to slaughter houses in Canada and Mexico. If you cared you would support that ban and advocate for the federal ban. Anything short of that is not advocating animal welfare.

While many of your statements were factually false, one stood out. You claimed that you had not heard from any veterinarians opposed to the use of the captive bolt gun. This was addressed before many Illinois General Assembly members in my previous testimony.

The use of captive bolt guns (CBGs), which are commonly used in the slaughter of livestock (including horses), has been a point of great contention in the debate on horse slaughter. Because CBGs can theoretically be used by a veterinarian - in specific circumstances - to euthanize horses, some have tried to equate its use in the slaughterhouse with humane veterinary euthanasia. To clarify, the CBG is a mechanical method by which, in ideal circumstances, animals can be rendered immediately unconscious (not killed) through a quick blow to the brain by a metal bolt prior to death by exsanguination. In order for the method to work as intended, the captive bolt must be administered properly. According to the AVMA's own guidelines, the head of the animal to which the captive bolt is being applied must be restrained or still and a highly skilled individual. In the slaughterhouse none of these best case scenarios are in place: the majority of horses are

panicked, their heads are unrestrained, and the person administering the captive bolt is a low-paid worker who is expected to move horses through the kill line at high speed. Herein lays the controversy surrounding the use of the captive bolt in horse slaughter.

In its 2007 AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia, the AVMA rates the use of the captive bolt to euthanize horses as "acceptable". However, it is the opinion of VEW professionals that this categorization was based on studies conducted on species other than equine. No studies are cited in the 2007 AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia showing that any scientific research has been conducted to evaluate the humaneness or efficacy of the captive bolt gun for use specifically on horses.

Further review finds that within the 2007 AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia denoted reference #112-- Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), Guidelines for Humane Slaughter and Euthanasia. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 1987:64:4-7 is contradictory to the opinion of the AVA reference itself.

The Australian Veterinary Association clearly states the following:

Horses:

*Abattoirs--- "An adequate caliber firearm or a humane killer may be used to render the horse unconscious for bleeding. The captive bolt pistol is not satisfactory for horses since firm pressure on the forehead is essential for its effective use and this tends to be resisted by the horse. This problem applies to a lesser extent with the humane killer".*

Therefore, it is the conclusion of VEW professionals that the captive bolt should be deemed "conditionally acceptable" and used only in emergency (non-slaughter) situations where no other option exists to humanely end a horse's suffering or when advanced circulatory dysfunction might diminish the efficiency of chemical euthanasia. Even then it must be administered properly. The use of the CBG in the context of slaughter should not be equated with humane veterinary euthanasia.

Sincerely,  
Nena J. Winand, DVM, PhD  
Founding Member, Veterinarians for Equine Welfare