

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare

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Veterinarians for Equine Welfare**

Testimony Before the

**US House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security**

Hearing on H.R. 6598, the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act

Thursday July 31, 2008 9:30am Room 2141

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R.6598, the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act. I am Dr. Nicholas Dodman, Professor, Section Head and Program Director of the Animal Behavior Department of Clinical Sciences at Tufts' Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, Massachusetts.

I graduated from Glasgow University Veterinary School in Scotland where I received a BVMS degree. I was a surgical intern at the Glasgow Veterinary School before joining the faculty. I received a Diploma in Veterinary Anesthesia from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and am board certified by the American College of Veterinary Anesthesiologists and the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.

I am a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the Leadership Council of the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA), the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), and the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB).

I founded the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts in 1986, and am a founding member of Veterinarians for Equine Welfare.

I have written four bestselling trade books, two textbooks and more than 100 articles and contributions to scientific books and journals. I appear regularly on radio and television programs including: 20/20, Oprah, The Today Show, Good Morning America, Dateline, World News with Peter Jennings, Discovery Channel, NOVA, Animal Planet, the BBC and CBC, CNN's Headline News, Inside Edition, MSNBC, NOVA, NPR's "Fresh Air" and A&E. I am an ad hoc guest on WBUR's "Here & Now."

I want to thank the primary sponsors of this legislative effort – Representatives Conyers and Burton. I also wish to thank the members of this Committee who have cosponsored this legislation.

Veterinarians Oppose Horse Slaughter

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare (VEW) is a group of veterinarians committed to the humane treatment of all equines, and as such we support measures to end horse slaughter including passage of the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act (H.R. 6598). 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 2007.

Given the recent closure by state law of the last remaining foreign-owned horse slaughter plants operating in the United States, the surge in horses going to a grisly death in Canada and Mexico, and this opportunity currently before Congress to end the suffering of America's horses through speedy passage of the federal Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act, VEW is compelled to interject its expertise on this subject. I would like to address, from a professional veterinary perspective, key points on the issue of horse slaughter that warrant a rapid end to this wholly brutal and un-American trade.

Horse Slaughter is *not* humane euthanasia

It is the united professional opinion of the members of VEW that horse slaughter is inhumane, and that it is an unacceptable way to end a horse's life under any circumstance. One need only observe horse slaughter to see that it is a far cry from genuine humane euthanasia. From the transport of horses on inappropriate conveyances for long periods of time without food, water or rest - to the very ugly slaughter process in which horses react with pain and fear, no evidence exists to support the claim that horse slaughter is a form of humane euthanasia. Rather, it is a brutal process that results in very tangible and easily observable equine suffering.

The suffering of horses in slaughter is accentuated by the very fact that they are not raised for slaughter. Horses going to slaughter have largely been accustomed to close human contact whether through racing, ranch work, pleasure riding, showing or any of the other ways in which horses are used in this country. While some are purposely sold into slaughter by their owners most end up at the abattoir through pure bad luck: they were sold at auction and the winning bidder was a "killer-buyer" working for one of the slaughter plants. To suddenly be handled and treated as livestock must be disorienting and frightful, and can only compound their suffering as they proceed to slaughter.

It is an unethical and dangerous practice to equate horse slaughter with humane euthanasia.

No ethical veterinarian, faced with a client who has a horse that is old, sick or otherwise no longer wanted, would suggest that the horse in question should be put on a truck and hauled thousands of miles to slaughter. Instead, the veterinarian would most likely suggest truly humane euthanasia via chemical injection, after which the carcass can be composted, buried, incinerated, sent to landfill or rendered.¹

¹ <http://www.vetsforequinewelfare.org/facts.php>

The AVMA does not advocate slaughter as a form of euthanasia to the general public. The association's brochure on equine euthanasia, *How do I know it is time?: Equine Euthanasia*, speaks only of veterinarian-administered euthanasia, not slaughter. The brochure states:

“Perhaps the kindest thing you can do for a horse that is extremely ill, severely injured, lame, or dangerous is to have your veterinarian induce its death quickly and humanely through euthanasia. Your decision to have your horse euthanized is a serious one, and is seldom easy to make.”²

Transport of horses to slaughter compounds equine suffering

Despite the presence of federal regulations governing the transport of horses to slaughter,³ horses continue to suffer immeasurably en route to slaughter. Current regulations are paltry, allowing for horses to be transported for more than 24 hours without food, water or rest. Heavily pregnant mares can be moved to slaughter, as can horses with broken limbs or who are blind in one eye. Further, the regulations only cover the final leg of the journey, so slaughter-bound horses moved from auction to feedlot, for instance, are not covered by the rule.

The ban on the use of double-decker vehicles to haul horses to slaughter only came into effect in December of 2006, despite pressure from welfare advocates to implement the ban with the final rule, which went into effect in early 2002 (the “double-decker ban” was phased in so as not to unduly impact the slaughter industry financially). Further and most significantly, because the ban only applies to the final leg of the journey to slaughter as previously mentioned, haulers can still move slaughter-bound horses across the country on double-deck conveyances designed for cattle and pigs and need only switch to single-deck trailers before arriving at the slaughter plant. Loading and unloading onto the rigs is stressful and injurious as horses must immediately go either up or down a relatively steep ramp to access one of the two floors. Because the trailers are divided into two levels and thus have low ceilings, many horses are unable to stand fully upright and are forced to travel in a bent position.

Not only are double-deck trailers inhumane, they are dangerous due to their high center of gravity. Numerous heart-wrenching and lethal accidents have occurred in recent years in which double-deck trailers were carrying horses to a middle-point along the route to slaughter. The results were grisly and absolutely avoidable.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed to broaden the scope of the transport regulations to cover all legs of the journey to slaughter but it is too little too late, particularly given that the domestic horse slaughter plants have been shuttered.

² “*How do I know it is time?: Equine Euthanasia*” April 2005,
http://www.avma.org/communications/brochures/euthanasia/equine/equine_euth_brochure.asp

³ Commercial Transportation of Equines to Slaughter, 9 CFR Part 88,
http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/animal_diseases/animal_id/9cfr88.shtml

Use of Captive-Bolt in Horse Slaughter Wholly Unacceptable

The use of the captive-bolt gun, which is commonly used in the slaughter of livestock (including horses), is one of the most egregious aspects of horse slaughter. To clarify, the captive-bolt gun is a mechanical method by which animals are supposed to be rendered immediately unconscious (not killed) through a quick blow to the brain by a metal bolt prior to actual slaughter. However, in order for the method to work as intended, the captive bolt must be administered properly. According to the AVMA's guidelines, the head of the animal to which the captive bolt is being applied must be restrained⁴ or still and a highly skilled individual must administer the fatal blow. In the slaughterhouse none of these scenarios is in place: the horse is often panicked, its head is 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 problem with 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 that any scientific research has ever been conducted to determine the humaneness or efficacy of the captive bolt gun for use specifically on horses.

Further review finds that 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 united conclusion of VEW professionals that the captive bolt should be 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 by a highly skilled operator. When used in the slaughter context it is not equitable with humane euthanasia.

Horses stabbed to death in Mexican slaughter plants

Recent investigations by the Humane Society of the United States and the San Antonio News-Express⁵ reveal that the use of the "puntilla knife" to sever the spinal cord of horses and render

⁴ The AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia (formerly the 2000 Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia), 2007

⁵ <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/mexico/stories/MYSA093007.01A.horseslaughter.3496288.html>

them unable to move prior to slaughter is common practice in Mexican slaughter plants. Footage shows horses being repeatedly stabbed in the neck with these knives prior to slaughter. Such a barbaric practice does not render the horse unconscious, it simply paralyzes the animal. The horse is still fully conscious at the start of the slaughter process during which the animal is hung by a hind leg, its throat slit and its body butchered.

Inhumane Horse Slaughter Methods in Canada

I personally had the opportunity in June of this year to review hidden camera video of many horses being slaughtered at the Natural Valley Farm horse slaughter plant in Saskatchewan, Canada – a plant known to slaughter imported American horses. I found the slaughter process inappropriate, inhumane, unsupervised, and in total disregard of the animals' welfare. Particular problem areas included:

- Horses being driven into the kill box were, for the most part, terrified. I believe this was because of the way they were being treated (horses are accustomed to being led, not driven); the use of prod sticks; the cacophonous clamor of the place (clanging, compressed air sounds, yelling); the attitude of the stunners; and the general atmosphere of inevitability/doom.
- The floor of the kill box was slippery so that when the terrified horses tried to run or jump their way out of their dreadful dilemma they often slipped and fell on the bloody metal floor or their feet would spin around as if they were trying to run on an ice rink.
- The sides of the kill box were not high enough to prevent them from seeing the disturbing sights of other horses being hung, bled out and butchered.
- The kill box was too wide and too long, allowing horses to back away from the stunner's access site.
- Because of the unsuitability of the slaughter setup, captive bolt operators were often trying to hit a moving target and in some cases were unable to locate the kill spot on the horses' forehead because the horse had turned around, slumped down, or moved backward in the kill box. When the stunner is trying to hit a brain the size of an orange in a skull the size of a suitcase any movement is likely to lead to incomplete stunning. I observed several horses being improperly "stunned." Mouthing, tonguing, and paddling of the feet were not uncommonly seen as horses were dragged away to be hung up and bled out. Some of these horses were likely still conscious as they were being bled. This experience is not significantly different than often occurred at horse slaughter plants operating in the U.S.
- Captive bolt operators and their assistants seemed impatient and were unkind to the horses, hitting them repeating, cussing at them, and generally showing no signs of empathy.
- Disturbingly, the foot cutter (amputation device) was next in line after the horses throats were slit (on one side only). It is possible that some may have had their feet cut off while semiconscious.
- Horses that should not have been transported or slaughtered were present at the plant. Horses with medical problems should not be shipped for slaughter and some would never have passed meat inspection.

Horse slaughter will not lead to an increase in equine abandonment and neglect

No increase in the abandonment or neglect of horses has been documented since the closure of the three domestic slaughter plants in the earlier part of 2007. This is not surprising. The horse slaughter business is not providing a service for the disposal of “unwanted” horses, but rather is preying on largely healthy, marketable horses⁶ that might otherwise be used for productive purposes. Several “news” reports surfaced in late 2007 claiming to show an increase in abandonment, but all have proven false. In fact, an article in the *Oregonian* quotes a local law enforcement officer regarding nine new cases of abandonment. When contacted the officer has denied any knowledge of the claims. A similar story in Kentucky was exposed as a hoax.⁷

In fact, when the number of horses going to slaughter declined by nearly 90 percent between the early 1990s and the early 2000s there was no correlating increase in abandoned or neglected horses.⁸ To the contrary, the temporary closure of the Cavel plant in Illinois between 2002 and 2004 resulted in a decline in equine abuse and neglect cases.⁹

Horse slaughter does not provide a humane service for “unwanted” horses

The vast majority of horses that go to slaughter are not lame, sick, injured or unwanted. Instead, the horse slaughter industry exists solely because a profit stands to be made in fulfilling gourmet demand in foreign countries for horseflesh. Where there is a market demand it will be supplied by market forces, in this case by unscrupulous companies and individuals who stand to profit off the slaughter of American horses. For example, when the three remaining horse slaughter plants were operating in the US, Cavel International imported horses from Canada for slaughter in order to fill their demand.

Humane euthanasia is available and affordable

The average cost of having a horse humanely euthanized by a veterinarian and their body disposed of is approximately \$225, less than the monthly overall cost of keeping a horse. It is VEW’s contention that this expense is simply a part of responsible horse ownership and one that most horse owners already bear without any reluctance.

⁶ “A survey of the condition of horses arriving at two Texas slaughter plants indicated that 92.3 percent arrived in good condition...” *Guidelines for Handling and Transporting Equines to Slaughter* by Temple Grandin, Ph.D. in *Guidebook for USDA’s Slaughter Horse Transport Program* issued December 2001.

⁷ No Abandoned Horses Found; Representative Ed Whitfield, *Florida Times-Union*.

⁸ Horse Illustrated - July 2002 quoting Carolyn Stull, Ph.D., animal welfare specialist at the Veterinary Medical Extension at the University of California, Davis on the 1998 California ballot ban of horse slaughter. “Stull also notes that there has been no increase in the number of horses being neglected in California as a result of the law. ‘One concern when the law passed was that there might be an increase in neglected or starved horses,’ she says. ‘This has not been the case.’”

⁹ In 2002, the Illinois based Hooved Animal Humane Society (HAHS) received 262 complaints of potential hooved animal (primarily equine) abuse and neglect in the state of Illinois. As of December 23, The Society has received 165 complaints for the year 2003.-- HAHS testimony to Illinois General Assembly in 2003.

Proper disposal of horse carcasses no longer slaughtered is readily available

As stated earlier the vast majority of horses currently going to slaughter are in good condition and are marketable for other purposes.¹⁰ There would be no need to dispose of them by some other method if horse slaughter were prohibited.

However, even if all horses currently going to slaughter would need to be mortally disposed of, the impact would be insignificant. A generally accepted rate of mortality among livestock in a given year is 5 - 10%. Therefore, based on the 9.2 million horses currently in the US, 460,000 - 920,000 die naturally or are humanely euthanized each year without notable impact. Another 100,000 (the approximate number of American horses slaughtered in 2007) or roughly 1% will make no significant impact.

In the overall picture of livestock disposal, horses are barely a measurable consideration. According to a study commissioned by the National Renderers Association¹¹ in which no mention of horses was made, almost 3.5 billion pounds of livestock and poultry mortalities were reported in 2000. During that same year, the US based horse slaughter facilities slaughtered 47,134 horses. Had all of these horses been disposed of by non-slaughter methods resulting in the need to dispose of approximately 47,134,000 pounds of matter (based on an average weight per horse of 1,000 pounds), this would have represented a mere 1.3% increase in the total livestock and poultry mortalities that year. If all of the 100,000 American horses slaughtered in 2007 required disposal that would only represent only a 2.8% increase over the entire 2000 livestock mortality figure.

Conclusion

Horse slaughter is not a form of humane euthanasia, nor is it a “necessary evil”. The horse slaughter industry is a predatory one that exists only because there is a profit to be made by fulfilling consumer demand in overseas markets for horse flesh. Rather than aiding horse welfare, horse slaughter results in very tangible animal cruelty and suffering while engendering abuse and neglect. Horse owners have an affordable, ethical choice of what to do at the end of their horse’s life – humane, veterinarian-administered euthanasia. Horse slaughter is not a form of humane euthanasia, but a gross form of animal cruelty. For these reasons, VEW supports an end to horse slaughter and advocates quick passage of the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act (H.R. 6598).

¹⁰ Senate Report 110-229, “TO AMEND THE HORSE PROTECTION ACT REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION on S. 311,” November 14, 2007, [http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/R?cp110:FLD010:@1\(sr229\)](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/R?cp110:FLD010:@1(sr229))

¹¹ Livestock Mortalities: Methods of Disposal and Their Potential Cost - March 2002, National Renderers Association, http://www.renderers.org/Economic_Impact/MortalitiesFinal.pdf

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare

July 28, 2008

Dear Representative:

RE: Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act of 2008 (H.R. 6598)

As veterinary professionals dedicated to ensuring the welfare and humane treatment of animals we urge you to support the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act of 2008 (H.R. 6598) introduced by Congressman John Conyers (D-MI), Congressman Dan Burton (R-IN) and many of their colleagues. Last year tens of thousands of horses are hauled all over the US to one of the three horse slaughter facilities (two in Texas and one in Illinois). Due to recent bans in these states, the slaughterhouses are now shipping horses even greater distances to their plants in Mexico and Canada where they face a gruesome death, often by knife to the back of the neck. Injured, sick or healthy, young or old – all are subject to this cruel industry. However, now there is an opportunity to address this before the United States Congress.

Oponents of the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act of 2008 (H.R. 6598) portray horse slaughter as a form of humane euthanasia, citing the American Veterinary Medical Association's classification of the captive-bolt as "acceptable" for euthanizing equines. This simplistic presentation of the facts fails to acknowledge the vast difference between efficient administration of the captive-bolt by a highly trained veterinarian with appropriate restraint of the horse's head (the AVMA specifies that the captive-bolt is acceptable "*with appropriate restraint*") and its improper use by low-skilled slaughterhouse employees without proper head restraint. Improper use of the captive-bolt during slaughter means that horses may often endure repeated blows with the device, and may be improperly stunned as they proceed through slaughter.

Further, this misrepresentation of the facts fails to recognize the immense suffering that horses endure *before they ever arrive at the slaughterhouse*. Federal regulations currently allow horses to be transported for more than 24 hours at a time without food, water or rest, on double-deck cattle trailers, with broken limbs, with eyes missing. These permitted conditions contrast sharply with generally-accepted practices for moving horses in a humane manner. Euthanasia of a horse by a licensed veterinarian is a far cry from the suffering faced by horses sent to slaughter, and it is disingenuous to suggest that the two are comparable simply because the mechanism by which horses are stunned at the slaughterhouse can, in theory, be humane.

Horse slaughter, be it by choice or accident, is NOT humane. Please don't be misled by a few who profit from this cruel industry those who may attempt to portray this practice as a necessary choice. The entire industry must be shut down.

Sincerely,

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