



Horse slaughter controversy still rages

Debate rages as animals sent to Mexico

By John MacCormack | June 4, 2016 | Updated: June 5, 2016 9:47am



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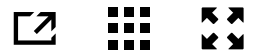


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Salvador Baeza, owner of a stockyard in Presidio, exports unwanted horses to Mexico, where they are slaughtered. Thousands of horses bound for slaughter in Mexico are exported through Presidio each year.

PRESIDIO — A roadside memorial south of Balmorhea includes a metal sculpture of a horse in jaunty pose, a rusty cutout of a dozen steeds in full gallop and an old ranch saddle astride a cottonwood log.

Visitors have left more than 100 cards on the fence, each with the same poignant message: “Ride to all the slaughter bound horses, burros and mules that have been hauled down this highway on their last ride.”

Their ride down Texas 17 in crowded stock trailers includes a stop at the stockyards in

Presidio, where they are weighed and inspected before continuing south into Mexico.

“Their nightmare journey begins when they enter the slaughter pipeline at the auction house. My ultimate goal would be to keep them all out of those ‘kill-buyer’ trailers,” said Neta Rhyne, 65, of nearby Toyahvale, who erected the memorial last year.



Nearly a decade after the last three horse slaughterhouses closed in the United States — including two in Texas — the trafficking of American horses for slaughter continues and the controversy burns as fiercely as ever.

In 2014, it flared anew when a legislative loophole prompted efforts to open slaughter operations in Oklahoma, New Mexico and elsewhere. That opening since has closed, leaving foreign slaughter the only option.

Since 2007, almost a million American horses have been sent to Mexico and Canada to be killed, butchered and exported to Europe and Asia, where local palettes find the meat a delicacy. A small amount of meat is returned to the U.S. to feed zoo animals.

Last year, the U.S. exported almost 75,000 slaughter horses to Mexico, through Presidio, Eagle Pass, El Paso and New Mexico, and another 40,000 to Canada.

But in the land of Trigger, Black Beauty and My Little Pony, there is a deep aversion to killing and eating what many consider a national cultural icon.

“Public opinion is on the side of the horses,” said Holly Gann of the Humane Society of the United States. “National polling in 2012 showed that 80 percent of Americans oppose horse slaughter for human consumption.”

Opponents, some of whom see the horse as a noble, companion animal, claim the practice of shipping them long distances, with little state or federal oversight, often involves abuse and neglect.

Others, however, say that the roughly 130,000 or more horses exported each year represent an unwanted domestic surplus, and that slaughter, even in Mexico where it can be less than humane, is better than neglect and abandonment at home.

Many of the horses acquired at auctions and shipped by “kill buyers” are young and in good health. And with horse rescue groups already overloaded, there is no obvious way to

absorb more unwanted animals.

Repeated legislative attempts to halt the practice have failed since 2006, when the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act was first introduced.

A bill pending in Washington takes a different approach. HR 1942 would declare horse meat unsafe for human consumption because of drugs given to the animals, and also prohibit transportation of horses for human consumption.

If passed, the bill, now lingering in committee, would end horse slaughter.

But for some animal welfare groups already struggling with too many unwanted horses, the prospect of 100,000 or more new animals materializing, year after year, is alarming.

“It’s a terrifying question from a horse rescue person’s perspective. I don’t know what would happen. We would be flooded and we’re already flooded,” said Jennifer Williams, president of Blue Bonnet Equine Humane Society in Austin.

“I think over the course of 10 to 15 years, maybe fewer, it would stabilize. People would realize they don’t have a low-end option to dump all the foals they breed that have no purpose, but that would take time. Horses can live 25 to 30 years,” she said.

The last stop

For tens of thousands of horses a year, the dusty stockyards east of Presidio, an isolated border city south of Marfa, are the last stop on the way to slaughterhouses in Ciudad Chihuahua and Zacatecas, Mexico.

For most horses, the layover in Presidio is brief: After being inspected by Mexican veterinarians and weighed, they’re reloaded on trailers and sent south on the final leg of the ride.

On a recent morning, about 170 newly arrived horses waited in the pens at the Baeza Cattle and J&R Horse lots, nibbling hay and oat straw.

To the untrained eye, almost all appeared in good health, with only a handful showing signs of aging, neglect or minor injury.

In the subsequent inspections by veterinarians, only one horse was rejected, lot operators said.

“The most common reason for rejection is wounds. The second is ticks. If they can’t walk or are sick, they are rejected,” said Dr. Fernando Trujillo, one of three veterinarians who inspected horses that day at the two lots.

Other horses, Trujillo said, can be turned back because of irregularities in the paperwork and their microchip information.

“Overall, the quality of the horses has improved over the last five years,” he noted.

Horses rejected by Mexican inspectors must stay behind in Texas, and, having suddenly lost most of their commercial value, can be returned to their owners or face a still more uncertain fate.

Five years ago, 46 carcasses were found in a creekbed behind C4 Cattle Co., which went defunct. The illegal dumping prompted an investigation by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, although no citations were issued.



Earlier that year, an animal welfare group complained about hundreds of starving horses and cattle in the Alvarado pens.

The county sheriff concluded the animal cruelty claims were unfounded but sequestered 300 hungry horses until their owners could claim them.

This spring, as first reported in the Big Bend Sentinel, Presidio was forced to confront an extraordinary surge of large animal carcasses being brought to its municipal landfill.

In 2012, city officials say, 12.5 tons of dead horses and donkeys were disposed of there. Over the next three years, 330 tons of carcasses — representing about 1,000 dead animals — were dumped, almost all by the exporters.

City officials said the longstanding charge of \$22.50 a carcass is much too low and that the life expectancy of the small landfill is being shortened by the flood of large dead animals.

“Very few other places have this problem. It was really created by the USDA stopping the butchering of horses in the United States. So that forced them down here on the border,” said Brad Newton, Presidio’s economic development director.

Each dead horse, he said, requires a large hole and 3 feet of dirt cover, while normal trash needs only 6 inches. The space taken up by each dead horse could hold \$200 worth of compacted trash.

“I guess the people who were trying to protect the horses actually made things worse for

them. These are not Presidio horses, we're just the end of the trail," he said.

After much haggling with the horse pen operators, the City Council last month approved an increase in the dumping charge to \$60 for the first eight horses delivered each month, and \$70 each for all beyond that.

Unwanted horses

The reason for the dramatic 10-fold increase in dead animals in Presidio remains unclear.

Ruben Brito, who runs the J&R Horse pens east of town, which in November alone dumped 75 animals, attributed the sharp rise to normal attrition during a period of very high volume.

In November, J&R shipped 110 loads of horses — representing about 3,300 animals — to Mexico. All told, J&R disposed of more than 400 dead horses and donkeys in 2015, according to city figures.

"I have been accused of being a horse-killer," said Brito, who has had confrontations with animal protection people on his lot. "The thing that bugs me is they accuse me of all kinds of things, but it's all just a game to get people to send more money."

He said the horses end up in Presidio because they're apparently unwanted elsewhere.

"What are you going to do with these horses here?" he asked.

Pointing to a large black and white paint leaning curiously over the pen fence, he noted: "This mare has never been ridden. Look at its shoes. It's gentle but it's not broken, and its never been bred. Who is gonna buy this horse?"

Motioning to another, a stout gelding with numbers branded into its hip, he said, "That's a rodeo horse, but if you don't buck, what then? It's like everything else."

And because the nearest veterinarian is an hour and a half away, if an injured horse must be euthanized, it gets a bullet in the head, a practice some others have found shocking, he noted.

"We've got too much regulation, too many goody-goodies. You can't be a rancher without having a lawyer by your side," he complained.

The other currently active operation, Baeza Cattle, is far smaller and disposed of only about 50 animals last year, the city's figures show.

"If a horse is broke down, if it can't make it into the truck, you have to put it out of its misery," said Salvador Baeza, most of whose business is importing cattle from Mexico.

“I’m not in the horse business. I never buy horses. I never own horses,” he said, adding he merely provides a temporary way-station at a charge of \$6.50 a horse.

“Our suppliers send us good horses. Do you see horses that have been mistreated?” Baeza asked. “Anytime you put horses in a trailer they can get hurt.”

Brito said that lately, the horse traffic to Mexico has slumped significantly.

“We were doing 15 to 20 loads a week, but now were down to seven or eight. It’s the devaluation of the peso,” he said.

Exports to Europe banned

Last year, the number of horses exported to Mexico dropped by about 20,000, to just under 75,000. This year, the pace of exports is even slower, with only about 25,500 horses exported through May.

One reason for the slowdown was a move last year by the European Union to stop accepting horse meat from Mexico. It acted over fears of drug contamination and claims by activists of cruelty and neglect.

The decision came after a welfare group called Animals’ Angels, which regularly does on-the-scene investigations of the trade, from the auction to the slaughterhouse in Mexico, shared its findings with the Europeans.

Its reports, which sometimes include graphic photos of badly injured, starving or abused animals, include accounts of visits made to the border stock pens.

“The Presidio slaughter horse export pens in Texas have a long, sordid history of violating environmental laws, illegal carcass dumping and animal cruelty,” Animals’ Angels wrote in one recent assessment.

In late 2014, Animals Angels’ submitted a thick report to the European Union detailing abuses and possible contamination by pharmaceuticals of horse meat processed in Mexico.

“We flew to Brussels and I met with the European Commission myself,” said Sonja Meadows, founder of the Maryland-based group.

“We showed a video of our findings for the past seven years. We gave them a 100-page report highlighting the transport issue and the food-safety issue,” she said. “I could see they were truly appalled and surprised at the amount of cruelty they saw. I think it kind of caught them by surprise.”

In early 2015, the EU, which had also sent its own inspectors to Mexico and the U.S.,

including to the stock pens in Presidio, imposed a ban on horse meat from Mexico.

Noting that 87 percent of the Mexican horse meat came from U.S. horses, the final report cited “animal welfare problems” and a lack of confidence in the system designed to ensure the animals have a clean drug history.

“The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) does not take responsibility for the reliability of affidavits issued for horses originating in the US, and the FVO audit team found very many affidavits which were invalid or of questionable validity,” read the report.

Where Europe had regularly imported most of the horse meat produced in Mexico, that market has vanished. Now, Mexican horse meat is believed to be going elsewhere, and consumed domestically.

“We have found they have shifted to the Russian market, and some to Vietnam,” Meadows said.

Animal welfare issue

Despite its nearly 200 co-sponsors, and fervent support from the Humane Society, ASPCA and other animal welfare groups, HR 1942, the so-called Safeguard American Food Exports Act, appears mired in the political mud of Washington.

Nevertheless, ASPCA vice president Nancy Perry said, the bill has brought progress in the public and political realms on the underlying issue.

“The administration has been overtly supportive of a ban on horse slaughter. (Hillary) Clinton has an animal welfare platform that includes a prohibition on horse slaughter. It just hasn’t been part of the dialogue at that level before,” she said.

And, she said, the ASPCA is convinced that millions of Americans would adopt horses if they were no longer being exported for the benefit of the horse industry.

“Yes there would be disarray and chaos, but the horses would be better off. If we quit incentivizing overbreeding and discarding horses, the market would adjust to the circumstances,” she added.

But some groups that oppose the bill believe it would create bigger problems.

“It’s strictly an animal welfare issue for us,” said Ward Stutz of the American Quarter Horse Association, which, along with the Farm Bureau of America and others oppose HR 1942.

“What do you do with all those horses if that act should pass? I just think the potential for

abandonment and neglect is much greater,” Stutz said.

Things probably were better for horses before the closures of the domestic slaughter plants effectively ended oversight by USDA inspectors of the industry, he said.

“For both sides, the humane treatment of horses is paramount. It’s just that some don’t agree that a horse should be euthanized and processed for food,” he added.

Even the American Veterinary Medical Association opposes a legislative ban on horse slaughter without adding protections for the surplus, unwanted horses.

Impasse continues

An operator of a North Texas horse auction, who has been involved in the business for 30 years and has sold thousands of horses to the “kill buyers,” says the current impasse will likely continue.

“I think nothing is going to change about this situation. There are people who want horse plants back in the States. That is not going to happen,” he said. “There are people who want to stop the horses from going to Mexico and Canada. That is not going to happen.”

The auctioneer, who asked that his name not be used or business be identified, said the issue has become an untouchable third rail for politicians.

“It’s too controversial. No one will vote for it. No one will vote against it. It doesn’t matter which way they go, people are going to be upset. So, these bills will continue to lay there,” he said of pending legislation.

The closing of the U.S. slaughterhouses in 2007, the economic crash of 2008, and the multiyear drought that followed all have conspired to force the price of horses to record lows, he said.

“They went from about 60 cents a pound to about 20 cents a pound. Now we are running into a shortage of horses. We are lower than anytime in 15 years,” he added of market bottom horses.

Mostly, he said, he just wishes the whole thorny issue, which is bad for business, would just go away.

“We need this deal to quiet down as much as possible. There’s a lot of rescue people who come and buy horses, and we’re OK with that. Anyone is welcome. We sell to the highest bidder and we want the highest prices possible,” he added.

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