Sugarcreek Auction and Leroy Baker – The investigation continues

Introduction:

Sugarcreek auction, located in the heart of Amish Country in Ohio, is one of the main slaughter auctions in the United States. Every Friday, kill buyers gather and buy approx. 95% of all horses that go through the sale. One of them is Leroy Baker, owner of Sugarcreek auction.

Baker has been in the horse slaughter business for more than a decade and has an astonishing long list of violations of humane laws. Animals’ Angels investigators visited the auction multiple times to document this abuse, even trailed his slaughter trucks for 36 hours all the way to Texas. However, the evidence was widely ignored by local authorities and Baker continued his business as usual.

In April of 2011, Animals’ Angels released photos, video and a summary report of 5 years of investigations at Sugarcreek Auction and included a call for action to friends and supporters. The release triggered tens of thousands of phone calls, letters and emails to Sugarcreek town officials and resulted in a meeting with Leroy Baker, Major Jeremiah Johnson, Assistant District Attorney Amanda Miller, Chief of Police Kevin Kaser, Auction Veterinarian Dr. Daugherty and Animals’ Angels.

Responding to this public pressure, Baker for the first time agreed to implement changes and to improve handling and conditions at his auction.

He committed to the following:

1) Employees will observe the pen area to identify aggressive horses in the pens. They will remove and segregate these horses immediately from these pens and put them in individual pens.

2) Horses will no longer be moved to the sale ring in large groups. The number of horses moved at one time is limited to 4

3) Employees will stop hitting horses in their faces and poking them in the eyes. Additionally, the employee working directly behind the auction ring (being unreasonable rough to horses) will be replaced with another employee.

4) Horses in need of euthanasia and unfit to travel will be euthanized immediately after the sale.

The Tuscarawas County Humane Society and the Chief of Police agreed to the following:

Humane Officer will attend the auction on a regular basis to ensure compliance with animal protection laws. Humane Officer will have the full support and cooperation of the Sugarcreek police if necessary. Chief Kaser & Humane Officer ensure timely response to complaints made against the auction by private individuals.

Since then, Animals’ Angels has conducted several follow up visits to the auction to check if these agreements were honored and the overall condition at the auction had improved.

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Findings:

2011/2012:

Improvements:

a) Overall handling appeared improved, employees were no longer observed hitting horses over the head and poking them in the eyes.
b) Kill pens were no longer overcrowded. Auction pens were still crowded, but not like they used to be.
c) Horses were moved to the auction ring in smaller groups of 4-6 horses. Handling observed was calmer than before.
d) No severely emaciated, injured or dead horses were found during visits.
e) Humane Officer was seen at the auction and reported his findings back to Animals’ Angels (2011)

Pens not crowded

Horses moved to auction ring in smaller groups

Remaining Concerns:

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a) Auction employees still did not pay enough attention to aggressive horses in the pen area. Fighting in pens continued and aggressive horses were not segregated.

b) Pens used to hold horses sold to Bauer and Baker immediately after coming out of the sales ring were still too crowded. Employees waited until pens held 13-16 horses before moving them to the larger pens.

2013:

4/4/13 Investigators arrived at the auction at 5:00pm. The white Sugarcreek Livestock semi with the double deck trailer was backed up to the loading ramp. The champagne Sugarcreek Livestock truck with the single deck trailer was parked in the parking lot.

At 7:30pm, the blue Sugarcreek Livestock semi and single deck trailer arrived at the auction. Shortly thereafter, all three trucks were backed up to the loading ramp.
At 9:00pm, the trucks started to load. 22 minutes later, the double deck trailer left the auction with cows. The champagne single deck followed, loaded with horses. Investigators followed and saw both trucks turning onto Route 39. Shortly after, investigators returned to the auction. The blue single deck was gone as well. Several pick-up trucks with stock trailers arrived to unload horses.

4/5/13
Investigators returned to the sale at 11:00am. The auction was already quite busy and the parking lot was crowded with stock trailers and semis. The maroon semi & single deck trailer of slaughter buyer Fred Bauer from La Rue, OH was parked in the back of the parking lot. The white semi of horse trader Carl Fisher from McVeytown, PA was parked in front of the loading ramps.

There were approx. 100 horses, 3 minis and 50 cows/calves inside the pen area. The tack sale had already started. All the larger pens had access to hay and water. The larger pens were not overcrowded. However, some of the smaller pens held 4-5 horses, making it impossible for the animals to move around. A breeder had dumped a group of gorgeous Arabian-Cross horses that caught the attention of a lot of auction visitors.
11:15am: Investigators noted a thin horse with a large, open injury on its hind leg. The injury was so deep that the bone was exposed and clearly visible. Auction workers had accepted the horse for sale, as indicated by the attached sales tag number 958 on the hip. The horse appeared to have been brought in with a second horse, sales tag # 959, which was very protective of the injured horse. He stayed close to the injured horse the entire time, preventing any other horse from coming too close.

After documenting the situation, the investigators informed an auction employee, who appeared to be the barn manager, about the injured horse. They also suggested that the auction veterinarian, who was present at the sale, checked on the horse. The employee replied that he would inform the veterinarian and take a look.

Shortly thereafter, another worker took the injured horse out of the large pen and moved it all the way to the back of the barn into Bakers slaughter horse holding pen. The pen did not contain any horses at that point, but held cows and calves. He tied the horse to the fencing and left. Investigators continued to observe the animal to check if someone would address the situation or if the veterinarian would check on the horse. Nothing happened. Separated from his friend, horse 959 became very agitated and started running around in the pen, desperately calling for the other horse. The injured horse responded and the two horses kept calling each other for hours in the most heart breaking way.
At 12:35pm, the veterinarian was observed drawing blood for Coggins testing in the pen next to the injured horse. However, he never bothered to check on the injury.

The sale started at 1:37pm. Auction workers moved horses to the sales ring in groups of 4-6. No hitting in face or poking in eyes was observed. However, workers did hit the horses harder than necessary on several occasions. Additionally, they left the horses sold to Baker and Bauer too long in the small holding pens before moving them back to the larger pens, which resulted in some kicking and fighting.

As usual, the majority of the horses going through the sale were sold to Baker and Bauer. All horses sold at fast pace and the sale ended at approx. 2:25pm. Investigators continued to observe the horse to see if the auction would take any action. However, none was observed.

At 2:45pm, the Bauer Farms truck backed up to the loading ramp, loaded and left.
At 5:15pm, investigators decided to contact law enforcement to get help for the suffering animal. Chief of Police Kevin Kaser was very helpful and sent an officer out right away to investigate. When the officer arrived, he found the horse in the pen and took photographs.

Witness testimony showed that the horse had been brought to the auction in this horrific condition and that it travelled all the way from Michigan. At this point, the officer made the decision to euthanize the struggling animal. All evidence was turned over to the Prosecutor’s Office and the law director of Sugarcreek Village for follow up.

**Conclusion:**

While it appears that the auction remains improved regarding overall handling and overcrowding of pens, several major concerns remain:

- a) The horse sale tag #958 should have never been accepted for the sale. Trying to sell an animal with such a horrific injury is completely intolerable.

- b) Additionally, the response to our complaint about the horse was very poor. The auction was notified at 11:30am and chose not to do anything to help this horse for 6 hours. It is likely that the horse would have spent the night and would have shipped to slaughter the next day without our intervention.

- c) Some pens remain overcrowded and workers left horses in post-sale pens too long.