

SLAUGHTER OR STARVATION - Slaughterhouse option sharpens debate over abandoned horses

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LAS CRUCES — When Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin signed legislation in late March lifting that state's 50-year-ban on slaughtering horses and exporting their meat, she framed the measure as a way to provide a humane alternative to the fate she argued awaits unwanted horses — neglect, abandonment, starvation. Six New Mexico livestock organizations took the same line in a May 10 letter urging Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to green-light federal inspections needed for the Valley Meat Co. to begin **horse** slaughtering operations in Roswell.

“... The unwanted **horse** issue must be addressed,” said the letter, signed by the heads of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association, the Farm and Livestock Bureau, the New Mexico **Horse** Council and three other organizations. “Horses are being turned out on private, state, federal and tribal land, left to starve to death, die of thirst or become prey. . . We believe those horses . . . deserve to stay in-country so that USDA inspectors can guarantee a humane process.”

Valley Meat supporters say a slaughterhouse in New Mexico, overseen by USDA inspectors, would provide a more humane death than in Mexico. South of the border, slaughterhouse workers have been known to use a knife to sever the spinal cord of a **horse** before bleeding it out, if a captive-bolt gun is not available to destroy the **horse**'s brain.

But the size of the abandoned **horse** problem, and whether the phenomenon is an argument for restarting **horse** slaughterhouses in the United States after a six-year absence, are, like everything surrounding the slaughterhouse, a source of debate.

“It's not like there are only two options in the world, starvation or **slaughter**,” said Lisa Jennings, executive director of Animal Protection of New Mexico and a participant in the state Agriculture Department's unwanted **horse** working group. “Trying to sell **slaughter** as a solution to **horse** overpopulation is absurd.”

Meanwhile, Valley Meat faces numerous roadblocks. While the USDA appeared poised to approve the inspections, the U.S. House Appropriations Committee voted last week to end federal funding that would pay for the inspections. That would effectively ban **horse slaughter** in this country.

At the state level, the company is expected to face opposition as it seeks a permit from the state Environment Department to discharge wastewater from the plant into lined lagoons.

There are no official estimates on how many abandoned horses roam the state, said Bill Sauble, chairman of the state Livestock Board, which takes no position on the slaughterhouse proposal. Gov. Susana Martinez has expressed opposition, as has most of the state's congressional delegation, Attorney General Gary King and Land Commissioner Ray Powell.

Caren Cowan, executive director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association, estimates that about 90,000 feral horses wander the state, with the bulk, about 70,000, on the vast Navajo reservation. Feral horses, domesticated animals that have been set loose or abandoned, are distinguished from federally managed herds of wild mustangs.

Some Valley Meat critics believe a slaughterhouse in the industrial border city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, exacerbates the problem of abandoned horses. They argue that when Mexican livestock inspectors reject **slaughter**-bound horses for various reasons, some of the horses are abandoned at the border.

But officials with the Border Patrol, the Bureau of Land Management and the Doña Ana County sheriff's department said abandoned horses are not a significant problem at the state's southern border.

It's another story in other parts of the state.

Nearly 1,000 horses are believed to roam the Jicarilla Apache reservation, according to a 2012 count. As many as 100 unclaimed horses are in the Placitas area.

Mescalero Apache President Frederick Chino Sr., who supports the Roswell slaughterhouse, told an Albuquerque TV station in April that about 4,000 horses run free on the tribe's reservation in the Sacramento Mountains. But Sgt. Tyner Cervantes of the tribe's Conservation Department, said the number is closer to 1,000 — and that that number is still too many.

"They are in the housing area, they are in the forest, they are everywhere," Cervantes said. "I know that's why we don't have any mule deer. The mule deer are being pushed off the reservation because there's nothing for them to eat."

Patience O'Dowd, president of the Placitas-based Wild **Horse** Observers Association, doubts there are as many unwanted horses in the state as the livestock industry claims: "There has been no count to back up these numbers of 90,000 or tens of thousands."

O'Dowd also denies there is an overpopulation problem in the nation generally. She said about 900,000, or 10 percent of the nine million horses nationwide, die each year by euthanasia or from natural causes, while about 160,000 horses were exported to Canada and Mexico for **slaughter** last year.

Those exported horses "could have gone the same route as the 900,000 — composting, burial, cremation or rendering," O'Dowd said. "There's not an overpopulation problem. This is solely an issue where certain folks in the equine industry want to get the last \$200 out of the **horse**'s hide."

'Horrific problem'

Matt Rush, executive vice president of the state's Farm and Livestock Bureau, said whatever the number, the reality is that thousands of horses have been abandoned across the state. "This is a horrific problem," Rush said. "We've created an uncountable **horse** problem."

Slaughter backers say because of hard economic times, many owners cannot pay the cost of about \$200 per month in feed and simply abandon their animals. Some don't want to pay the cost of euthanasia, from \$100 to \$250, or disposal.

Sauble noted that Livestock Board investigations of animal cruelty cases, the vast majority involving horses, rose from 53 in 2004 to 161 so far this year. "We see it as in large part drought-related," he said. "We are picking up unprecedented numbers."

Selling a **horse** for **slaughter** doesn't provide much of a return. Two industry officials said a **slaughter**-bound **horse** typically sells for under \$50, but the owner saves the cost of putting the **horse** down and disposing of the body.

"If people can get some return on an animal, they may be more likely to send it to **slaughter** for a humane exit, rather than taking it somewhere down the road and turning it out where it's going to starve to death," Cowan said.

Horse slaughter in the United States stopped in 2007, after Congress stopped funding USDA inspections of **horse** meat in 2006. But when funding was restored last year, Valley Meat applied for inspections to convert a former cattle processing plant to handle horses. When American slaughterhouses in Illinois and Texas closed in 2007, the number of horses exported to Canada and Mexico jumped from 33,000 in 2006 to 78,000 in 2007.

The **slaughter** option is already available via processing plants in Canada and Mexico, with the municipally owned plant in Ciudad Juárez the closest alternative. Livestock industry representatives say a USDA-inspected plant in the U.S. is more likely to ensure that horses are killed humanely.

Opponents like Jennings, however, argue there is no such thing as humane **slaughter**, even when it's overseen by the USDA. The long distances horses are shipped in trailers subject them to stress and injury. Past USDA inspections of horseprocessing plants in Texas found many instances when workers were unable to render skittish, flailing horses senseless with a single shot from a captive-bolt gun and subjected animals to repeated shots. And, Jennings said, sensitive horses will be terrified as they are led into the kill chute.

"We can do better than this. We are pushing for a third choice —that's through humane euthanasia," she said.

Rejected horses

Some critics argue the presence of the slaughterhouse in Ciudad Juárez aggravates the problem of abandoned horses, in particular at the border. Bernalillo resident Betty Pritchard, board member of Wild **Horse** Observers Association, says roughly 20,000 horses are rejected by Mexican agricultural officials for export to Mexico at livestock crossings along the Southwest border and that many of them are then simply abandoned by their owners.

". . . Many are just dumped, set free, or whatever," Pritchard wrote the Journal. "The point is, these 'killer buyers' are breaking the law by abandoning horses to become feral. . . Having a slaughterhouse here will just make it worse to increase the feral **horse** population."

The source for the number of horses rejected at the border came from a European Commission audit of the supply chain for horses imported to Europe from North America in 2011. The commission routinely audits Mexican slaughterhouse practices as part of its efforts to ensure the safety of the food supply.

According to the 2011 audit, 19,203 live horses out of 58,300 presented at the border for import were rejected for a variety of reasons, including illness, injuries and inadequate identification and documentation. How many horses are rejected for export in New Mexico at a livestock crossing in Santa Teresa is unclear. From 2009 through 2012, an average of 10,279 horses were exported into Mexico from Santa Teresa. Crossing director Daniel Manzanares said the number of horses rejected for health problems, being pregnant or, in the case of males, not being gelded, is "a small percentage."

Regional officials say if horses are abandoned at the New Mexico border, the number is small.

"We have a few on public land," said Roger Cumpian, a range management specialist with the Bureau of Land Management, "but I haven't seen thousands." Several members of the ranching industry said they believe the debate over the humaneness of **slaughter** illustrates a rural-urban divide in New Mexico: rural folk seeing horses as livestock, city folk seeing them as companion animals. Seventy percent of New Mexicans oppose **horse slaughter**, according to APNM.

Laurino Arvizo oversees horses that cross the Mexico-New Mexico border at Santa Teresa. According to a 2011 audit, nearly 20,000 live horses presented at the border for import were rejected. These horses are awaiting **slaughter** at a plant in the industrial border city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Supporters of a proposed slaughterhouse in Roswell say it would kill horses more humanely than plants south of the border.