

Protecting the Regulatory Framework That Supports Equine Welfare in the United States

Why A Legal Ban On Transportation of Horses For Human Consumption Will Not Improve Equine Welfare

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Why address this issue now?

Several events have caused the subject of horses for human consumption to be debated recently. In 1998, a ballot initiative was passed in California that banned the sale of horses intended for human consumption. Recently, with the *Foot and Mouth* and *Mad Cow* epidemics in Europe, horsemeat is more in demand, causing increased media attention. In addition, a bill was recently proposed in the United States (US) House of Representatives that would ban all transportation in the US of horses intended for human consumption.

It appears to be the first step by animal activists to initiate campaigns aimed at making transportation of all livestock for human consumption illegal.

Do horse associations approve of the processing of horses for human consumption?

We support the rights of horse owners to manage their personal property in their best interests, provided their horses are treated humanely and with dignity, respect, and compassion. We recognize that this is a societal and cultural issue, and will be viewed differently by some horse owners. Therefore, we are not in a position to oppose the human consumption of horses as long as all state, federal, and international laws and regulations are obeyed. We maintain that without the existence of this legal market, some animals would be less than humanely managed until the end of their life.

Would banning the processing of horses for human consumption be a significant step toward improving equine welfare?

No. Only one state has passed a law regarding the processing of equines for human consumption. This law was passed via the initiative process in California in November of 1998. There is legal opinion that the law violates the commerce clause of the US constitution.

We do not feel that a legal ban on processing horses for human consumption will solve the underlying problem of unwanted horses. In fact, such a ban has a high probability of increasing the potential for abuse for horses that are no longer wanted, for whatever the reason may be. The decision to send a horse to a processing facility is a personal one. Although certainly not the most desirable, it is one way to dispose of a horse, which cannot be cared for, or has no viable use. Removing this option could make conditions far worse for unwanted horses. If a horse cannot be transported to an auction because it may go to a processing facility, there is high probability it will become a candidate for neglect and suffer a much worse fate than humane euthanasia at a USDA-regulated processing facility.

Is this an animal rights activists' issue?

Yes and no. Many well-meaning horse owners who are not animal rights activists get involved in campaigns to end the processing of horses for human consumption, feeling it is the right thing to do. But generally, these campaigns are part of a larger animal activist movement to end not only the use of animals as a human food source, but also ownership of animals-all animals. Animal activists' larger goal is to eliminate the use of animals in any capacity.

As a part of these campaigns, activists wish to reclassify horses as companion animals, claiming this would give horses more protection. Actually, this reclassification would be detrimental to both equine welfare and the horse industry. A white paper produced by the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) and the American Horse Council, *Legal Status of Horses as Livestock*, clearly outlines the potential effects of redefining horses out of their federal and state classifications as livestock in the areas of welfare, research, liability laws and tax considerations.

If not considered livestock, horses would not be protected by the regulatory framework that currently underpins equine welfare in the United States, or by the network of federal, state and local authorities, which enforces these laws and regulations. Welfare protection would fall to local animal control authorities that are already significantly overburdened. Furthermore, horses would no longer benefit from the money spent on disease prevention research, or from assistance provided to state and local research and regulatory programs. Such research is dependent upon the continued classification of horses as livestock animals.

Recent legislative proposals regarding equine transportation and processing for human consumption are just another step in the activists' campaigns.

How does the international market relate to the welfare of horses?

The international market provides a price floor within the equine industry that ensures every horse has a baseline economic value at every stage of its lifecycle. This is important because it prevents serious welfare problems such as overpopulation; it deters neglect, which would become a significant problem if horses were no longer of any commercial value.

How many horses are involved annually?

Horses processed for human consumption in 2000 represent only one (1) per cent of the 6.9 million commercial and recreational horses in the U.S., according to a study conducted by Barents Group for the American Horse Council Foundation.

If the number of horses at risk is not so large when compared to other livestock species, why not euthanize and bury them on site?

This may be a viable alternative in some cases. The disposal of a horse's carcass is an environmental concern. In many areas, state or local laws make it illegal to bury a horse on private property or dump the carcass in a landfill. Some horse owners with limited economic resources may find the expense of veterinarian euthanasia cost prohibitive, increasing the likelihood of neglect. Euthanasia, at a federally inspected and regulated processing facility, is more humane than a slow, prolonged death from starvation. These facilities must comply with strict federal and state codes designed for the treatment of these horses.

Can the welfare of horses be protected if they are going to the international market for human consumption?

Yes. The industry has clearly defined regulations, enforced by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to protect the animals being processed or transported to processing facilities. As with all livestock, the actual processing of the horse for human consumption is fully regulated by the USDA, and has been for years under the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. This requires USDA veterinarians and inspectors to review the processing plants and their methods to ensure they are following the requisite procedures. Horses must be handled in the same manner as other livestock by processing facilities and violations of the law subject processing plants to civil and criminal penalties.

Isn't the transportation of horses to processing facilities a major welfare issue?

Many who advocate placing a ban on the processing of horses for human consumption feel that transportation is a major detriment to the welfare of horses. However, studies have shown otherwise. A study conducted by Temple Grandin, Ph.D., and published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* in 1999 stated, "Results of this study indicate that owner abuse or neglect is the primary cause of severe welfare problems in horses arriving at slaughter plants."

In March 1996 Congress passed the Commercial Transportation of Equines to Slaughter Act. The Secretary of Agriculture was given authority to promulgate regulations to address welfare concerns surrounding the transport of equines to processing facilities. These regulations cover, among other things, the food, water, and rest that must be provided to horses, the actions required of a shipper in loading and transporting the horses, the fitness of the horses for travel and the nature of the trucks to be used. The horse industry supports these regulations and has met with the USDA several times seeking their adoption. The rules are currently awaiting signatures within the USDA, and once signed, will be enforced by USDA veterinarians who will meet and inspect each shipment of horses upon arrival at the facility.

What role do horse auctions play in the process?

In the horse industry, and in other parts of the agricultural world, auctions have been used for centuries as the primary means of facilitating transactions. The USDA regulates auctions in the US. Auctions are a standard method of the agriculture industry (and other industries) to facilitate transactions of commodities by bringing buyers and sellers together to negotiate a fair price based on supply and demand.

Within the horse industry, auctions facilitate the buying and selling of horses for virtually every purpose, most of which are more lucrative for sellers than the international meat market. An auction provides a forum where the value and use of horses are determined by the market, based on the opinions of the equine experts in attendance. High-quality animals are sold for racing, show ring competitions, ranch work or recreational riding. Lesser-quality animals, including unsound animals, are purchased by the processing facilities for processing into the international markets for food. Without this market, these animals would be at risk for neglect, abuse, and other welfare problems.

Doesn't the fact that California passed its law regarding transportation of equines for human consumption by state initiative signify that it's the right thing to do? Haven't legislators just been ignoring the problem?

There is a very good reason for the fact that the only law banning processing of horses for human consumption was passed by the initiative process. When a bill is introduced, legislators and their staff look into the issue surrounding that proposed bill and vote accordingly. Legislators have constantly voted against such proposals after learning about the welfare, environmental and other issues surrounding the ban of processing horses for human consumption. Legislators also are aware that regulations are in place to protect horses during transport. The public, on the other hand, votes on initiatives without the benefit of scientific and documented facts that legislators consider on such issues. Unfortunately, the public, if unaware of the larger perspective, can be susceptible to emotional campaigns by animal activists suggesting it's "the right thing to do."

Is humane euthanasia possible for horses being processed for human consumption?

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) considers the captive bolt method an acceptable and practical means of euthanasia for horses. When properly administered by trained personnel with well-maintained equipment, it is the most humane method available for euthanasia of horses for human consumption.

Isn't the issue of using horses as a human food source—agree or disagree—a matter of cultural perspective, not ethics?

Some feel that humans under any circumstances should not consume horsemeat. Many Americans find this practice unacceptable, just as we frown upon many customs and foods that other cultures deem acceptable.

However, decisions about equine welfare must be based on scientific facts and solid animal husbandry. Allowing emotional issues, cultural perspectives, or uninformed consumer opinion to jeopardize overall equine welfare would be a tragedy for horses in this country.

So what is the best solution?

As with all issues, it is important to keep a proper perspective. There are laws and regulations in effect to address welfare concerns regarding horses destined for human consumption.

Recognize that leading equine veterinary and regulatory organizations such as the AAEP, the AVMA and the USDA have experts that make professional recommendations and enforce regulations, ensuring that horses destined for human consumption are treated humanely and with dignity.

To maximize the value of your breeding stock, when considering breeding your mare, breed for a specific market. Castrate stallions of inferior quality. Always consider pedigree, conformation, performance records, and disposition of your breeding stock before proceeding.

If you are following sound breeding practices and are having difficulty finding a buyer for your horse in a specific market, consider alternative uses of your horse and try marketing it in that capacity.

Finally, don't be misled by animal activists having hidden agendas. Seek facts and information through legitimate industry organizations.

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