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GAO Report on Horse Processing Released

The demise of the U.S. horse processing industry hasn’t prevented horses from being shipped to Mexico and Canada for slaughter and has contributed to a rise in equine neglect incidents, according to a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report issued June 22.

The study authors examined how processing plant closures influenced the number of horses sold, exported, adopted, or abandoned in the United States; how closures have affected farm income and trade; and how the USDA has overseen horse transport to Mexico and Canada for slaughter.

From 2006 to 2010 the number of horses exported to Mexico and Canada for processing rose 660% and 148%, respectively, the authors said, and nearly the same number of horses were transported to Canada and Mexico in 2010 as were processed annually prior to plant closures.

The number of horses involved in cruelty and abandonment investigations in some states increased since the plants closed, the authors said.

“State, local, tribal, and horse industry officials generally attributed these increases in neglect and abandonments to cessation of domestic slaughter and the economic downturn,” the report authors explained.

The GAO recommended Congress either reinstate funding for USDA inspections at processing plants or ban slaughter in the U.S. altogether.

Jerry Finch, president of the equine protection organization Habitat for Horses, said the report contained a pro-slaughter bias and that it failed to consider how the recession and overbreeding affected the horse industry.

Processing proponent Wyoming State Rep. Sue Walls said she supported the report and its recommendation to reinstate inspection funding.

American Association of Equine Practitioners President William Moyer, DVM, issued a statement in response to the report: “The AAEP believes that horse processing is not the ideal solution for addressing the … unwanted horses in the U.S. However, if a horse owner is unable or unwilling to provide humane care and no one is able to assume the responsibility, euthanasia in a manner designated as humane by the American Veterinary Medical Association is an acceptable alternative to a life of suffering, inadequate care, or abandonment.”—Pat Raia

Bill Would Ban Horse Transport to Foreign Processing Plants

Legislation introduced into the United States Senate in June would ban the transport of horses from the U.S. to processing plants in Mexico and Canada.

Introduced by Senators Mary Landrieu and Lindsey Graham, SB 1176, the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act of 2011, would (if passed) amend the Horse Protection Act to prohibit the sale or transport of horses or equine parts in interstate or foreign commerce with the intent of processing them for human consumption.

“Americans have a responsibility to protect these intelligent, sensitive animals.”

NANCY PERRY

Wyoming State Representative Sue Walls, who sponsored successful legislation to facilitate private sector horse processing plant development in that state, said the bill threatens private property rights: “It is hard to imagine a more pervasive attack on the private property rights of horse owners to use or dispose of their animals as they see fit.”

Nancy Perry, senior vice president of government relations for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said the measure is necessary: “Americans have a responsibility to protect these intelligent, sensitive animals from being butchered in Canada and Mexico.”—Pat Raia

APHIS Proposes Mandatory HPA Penalty Rules

Horse Industry Organizations (HIOS) providing Horse Protection Act (HPA) compliance inspectors at horse shows would be required to impose mandatory minimum penalties for specific HPA infractions or risk decertification under new rules proposed by the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

The HPA prohibits “soring,” the deliberate injury of a horse’s feet and legs to achieve a high-stepping “big lick” gait. APHIS enforces the Act and trains Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs) to perform compliance inspections and also certifies the HIOs that hire DQPs for horse shows.

Under proposed rules announced in late May by agency Horse Protection National Coordinator Rachel Cezar, DVM, and Chester A. Gipson, DVM, the agency’s deputy administrator for animal care, minimum penalties for bilateral soring (injury to both a horse’s front or hind limbs) would range from a one-year suspension from exhibiting horses at shows for a first offense, to a four-year suspension for third or any subsequent offenses.

Proposed minimum penalties for unilateral soring (injury to one of a horse’s front or hind limbs) ranges from 60 days suspension for a first offense to one-year suspension for third or any subsequent offense.

Scar rule violations (which pertains to a visible scar on a horse’s lower leg that indicates the animal has been injured by soring) would carry penalties ranging from a two-week suspension for a first offense to a one-year suspension for third or any subsequent offenses, under the proposed rules.

Gipson said the proposed mandatory minimum penalty structure is intended to ensure penalty protocol consistency among APHIS-certified HIOs: “Our goal remains the same—to eliminate the cruel practice of soring horses. This proposed rule will strengthen our enforcement of the Horse Protection Act.”

To view the proposed rules visit www.regulations.gov and search APHIS-2011-0030-0001.

—Pat Raia