

Missouri bill could help horse industry

The ban of horse slaughterhouses decreased horse worth

BY PAUL BISCHOFF
AND KELLY CHAMBERS
for the Index

At a recent livestock auction in Kirksville, auctioneer Jeb Weaver struggled to get \$250 for a horse that probably would have fetched \$500 only a few years ago.

The auction, which took place at NEMO Fairgrounds, was representative of a declining industry across the country. Weaver said horse prices have fallen 50 to 70 percent since 2007, when the last horse slaughtering plant in the United States closed. Without a slaughter market to set horse meat prices, he said the bottom-line price on horses fell through the floor and crippled the entire equine industry.

Weaver said he could point to several people at the auction who have gone out of business because prices are so low. State legislation for the humane treatment of horses has effectively halted the killing of horses for human consumption, although no federal laws specifically ban it. "They should see what's going on in the horse world before they pass laws that affect so many people in a \$30 billion per year industry," Weaver said.

The last three major U.S. slaughterhouses were all foreign-owned. All three shut down because of state laws. Two in Texas closed in 2007 due to a state statute originally passed in 1949. Weaver said the statute was meant to prevent horse meat from being mixed with beef. The last plant, located in Illinois, closed after a state law passed making the slaughter of horses for human consumption illegal.

Additionally, Weaver said the United State Department of Agriculture has stopped funding inspections for horse slaughter, and it is illegal for a slaughter plant to pay for its own inspections. Because of this, no other companies have been able to fill the market gap. However, the Missouri House of Representatives recently

passed a bill to bypass the laws regarding USDA inspections. The bill is now on the Senate floor.

Weaver said horse meat was worth up to \$1 per pound at its peak a few years ago and is now down to about 35 cents for the best grade of meat. That means a 1,000 pound horse that once sold for \$1,000 now sells for as low as \$350. Lower grade horses sell for even cheaper. Although horse meat is often considered a taboo food in the U.S., people in countries such as France and Japan eat it as a delicacy.

Attorney Leslie Maxwell said the European Union is getting stricter on imported horse meat regulations. Horses that have been treated with certain common medications, such as Bute, the horse equivalent of Ibuprofen, no longer will be accepted. Maxwell also said that eating horse meat is losing popularity in Europe.

"Younger generations are just not interested in horse meat consumption," Maxwell said.

Alternatives to horse slaughter

Maxwell offers an alternative to horse slaughter. She operates a non-profit horse rescue in Walnut Grove, Mo., and started a grassroots campaign against horse slaughter called NoMoHorseSlaughter. Maxwell said she endorses euthanasia and giving up horses for adoption rather than resorting to slaughter.

Those alternatives are unappealing to sellers, however. They either pay a veterinarian for the euthanasia or adoption

fees to the horse rescue, rather than turning a profit.

"Euthanasia is usually between \$100 and \$200," Maxwell said. "I would be surprised that if an owner truly spoke to their veterinarian, that a vet would not be willing to work with them on payments or reduced fees."

Sharon Marohl, former president of the Missouri Equine Council, said she is unaware of any foolproof method of humanely killing a horse. A horse going to slaughter is restrained in a headlock and killed by an automated device called a captive bolt that pierces the horse's skull. Marohl said the process is not always instantaneous, but euthanasia isn't necessarily better.

"Dying is not a pretty process," she said.

Marohl said the chemical used to euthanize horses is hazardous, so the owner must then pay for a backhoe to bury the carcass. If owners are forced to get rid of their horses because they can no longer afford to take care of them, she said it's unreasonable to assume that they have the money to dispose of them. Because the slaughter market no longer exists in the U.S., Marohl said the consequences are counterproductive.

"I hope it comes back because, right now, hundreds of thousands of horses in this country are suffering from starvation and neglect because their owners don't have a way to divest themselves of an animal they can no longer care for," Marohl said.

Marohl said a horse being slaughtered is much more humane than letting a horse starve to death.

"It takes a very long time for a 1,200-pound horse to starve," Marohl said. "It first has to lose hundreds of pounds of fat and muscle. Then the body begins to digest its own organs."

Philip Johnson, professor of veterinary medicine at the University of Missouri, said euthanasia uses the same drugs as anaesthesia and is a fairly calm process. Johnson said the University of Missouri accepts donated horses whose owners can no longer afford to keep, but transporting a medically compromised horse can be more inhumane than putting it to sleep.

"If they would require a lot of care we couldn't keep them very long," Johnson said. "They would be observed by students and used for teaching but then would be euthanized."

He said the horses the university takes must be deemed valuable so they can be adopted later, or else they might be rejected. Johnson said the increase in demand for adoption facilities like Mizzou's is due to the economy.

"A lot of people are finding it is expensive to keep horses — especially taking care of and feeding them and looking after their health," Johnson said. "So people are abandoning their horses."

Because meat-packing facilities in Mexico and Canada are still available, Maxwell said she does not see an increase in abandonment, abuse and neglect as a result of the closure of slaughter plants.

"People who are going to abuse



Paul Bischoff/for the Index
A horse in a stable awaits its turn to be sold at the NEMO Fairground auction.

their horses are going to abuse their animals in good times and bad times," Maxwell said.

Horse slaughter continues across the border

As an owner and operator of 4-J Land and Cattle Co. in Waynesville, Mo., Jerry Laughlin said several factors weigh in when determining if a horse is usable or if it will go to slaughter. If a horse is unable to reproduce, misbehaves, gets injured, is aggressive, too old or handicapped, it has a greater chance of being slaughtered.

"You could drive yourself down the road and look and see horses all over the place right now that are so poor they can't hardly walk," Laughlin said. "I think a lot of those horses would have gone to slaughter earlier had there been a market for them."

Laughlin said the USDA has been unfair in that it treats horse ranches like hobby farms instead of businesses. Laughlin was adamant about horses being livestock, not pets.

"What's the difference in destroying him in a line with other horses and taking the meat and processing it and using it for benefiting somebody else than it is to go out there and put the horse down and burying him in the ground?" he said.

When meat prices were at their peak, a normal buyer could be outbid by what's known as a kill-buyer, Laughlin said. Kill-buyers purchase horses specifically for the purpose of taking them to slaughter. He said kill-buyers have no real criteria for buying a horse except price and weight.

Maxwell said kill-buyers now ship the horses to either Canada or Mexico to be slaughtered. According to federal law, horses that are blind or crippled are not allowed to be transported, so the horses that are bought for slaughter are relatively healthy.

"Craiglist, unfortunately, is a place where a lot of kill-buyers hang out," Maxwell said. "They'll go on to Facebook, and they find people who are pretty desperate trying to sell

their horses for \$100 or \$50."

A 750-mile ride to the Mexican or Canadian border is both expensive for kill-buyers and tough on the horses. Weaver said freight has become the biggest expense for horses going to slaughter.

Marohl said the methods of processing used in the United States are much more humane than those utilized in Mexico.

"At least in the United States we had inspectors," she said. "Animals were required to be watered, fed and rested while they were being held at the processing facility."

Bill could allow for slaughterhouses in Missouri

The Missouri House of Representatives recently passed a bill to bypass the ban on slaughterhouses paying for their own meat inspections. The bill is now on the Senate floor. The bill requires slaughterhouses to pay annual fees to the Missouri Department of Agriculture, which then would use that money to pay for USDA inspections. If passed, the bill would allow Missouri slaughterhouses to operate and fill the market gap created in 2007.

The Missouri House bill could be overridden by a federal bill, however. In the U.S. Congress, new bills and amendments to existing horse protection laws aim to prohibit the transit and trade of horses for slaughter. In particular, the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act was reintroduced to the U.S. House of Representatives in May, but it currently remains in committee. A poll of more than 150 people on OpenCongress.org said that 71 percent support the act.

"I'd rather see a horse be humanely slaughtered than see him standing around in a fence corner on three legs, crippled or walking around blind," Laughlin said. "I do not see the horse industry, until we have a slaughter market, ever being back to the level it was seven or eight years ago, regardless of the economy."

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