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Horse Slaughter to Decline in Coming Years

by John Holland and Vicki Tobin,
Equine Welfare Alliance



With the news media full of the distorted stories about the lifting of the inspections ban on domestic horse slaughter in the United States, there is a widely held belief that a horse holocaust is on the way. Those who have pushed to bring slaughter back are wildly speculating on how many slaughter plants will be opened around the country and where they will be located. Some are even foolish enough to espouse that slaughter will revitalize the US horse market. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There is a very good chance that no US plants will be opened and if they are, they will simply siphon off horses from the exports to Mexico and Canada. In reality, the total number of US horses slaughtered each year will soon begin to decline very significantly.

This is inevitable and will be caused by several factors. To understand these, one must first understand the source of the stream of horses that have been flowing from our auctions to the slaughter plants in Mexico and Canada since 2007.

Where slaughter-bound horses come from

The myth about slaughter horses is that they belonged to ordinary families who could no longer afford to feed them; they were old, lame or otherwise on the downslide. This is largely untrue.

In the years prior to the economic collapse of 2008, the horses being slaughtered were from a variety of sources, with the largest group being performance horses who had reached five to ten years old and were not successful enough to satisfy the horse business from which they came.

Some were disposed of at even younger ages simply due to their appearance or conformation in a process called "lotto breeding". Approximately 70% of slaughter horses were Quarter horses and another 16% were Thoroughbreds.

When these horses were disposed of, they were replaced by new foals. For the registries, especially the AQHA and the APHA, this was a de facto part of their business model. And that is what led them to make the mistake of thinking that if a little slaughter helped a little, then a lot of slaughter would help a lot. They in-

vested heavily in lobbying for the return of domestic slaughter.

Effects of the Declining Horse Market

Beginning in 2008, the market for horses began to decline. Prices, especially on the low end of the scale, dropped precipitously. The recreational market, into which the luckiest performance horses have traditionally gone and escaped slaughter, shriveled.

While this helped the bottom line for the slaughter industry, the actual number of horses bought for slaughter did not change significantly, even at bargain basement prices. The reason is that the profit margin is elastic enough, and volume is determined almost exclusively by the market demand for the meat.

Breeding Businesses Liquidate to Survive Recession

As the recession stretched on, a new factor came into play. Horse breeders began liquidating their broodmare herds and in many cases closing their doors. Soon, these horses began to make up a larger and larger part of the slaughter flow. Rescuers scrambled to save these once valuable horses, but many went to slaughter. The following graph shows the amazing collapse of the horse breeding business in recent years.

Here we will offer a few explanations: Registered foals make up only a portion of each year's foal crop, but performance horses tend to be registered and the registrations are the best indicator we have to total breeding. The data on foal registrations was compiled by the Jockey Club and was only available at five year intervals. Since all registry data was not available on a yearly basis, the decline in breeding appears to have started in 2005 when in fact it did not begin in earnest until late 2008. In just a few years breeding across the board declined 45%.

Sharp Decline in Slaughter but No Increase in Abuse and Neglect Statistics

It is useful to consider the years between 1989 and 2002 first. The precipitous decline in the slaughter of US horses during that period has often been cited by slaughter opponents as proof that a decline in slaughter does not necessarily result in an epidemic of abuse and neglect (more on abuse and neglect later in article).

The big question is why did slaughter soar so high and then decline by 83%? There were several factors that cause this, and understanding them will tell us what to expect in coming years.

Tax Loophole Closures Spur Horse Slaughtering

During the early 1980s, tax loopholes made speculation on horse breeding operations a popular business hedge. Any losses could be written off against other gains, and there was a social prestige to owning such a farm. When the tax loopholes were closed in the mid-1980s, these horses were liquidated, both in business terms and in the other meaning of the word. Slaughter soared to over 400,000 horses a year, while breeding declined.

The slaughter rate shot past the rate at which foals were being produced, and broodmare herds were sold off. By 1993 the number of horses available for the kill buyers was so reduced that the slaughter market crashed and plants began closing. Furthermore, an improving economy allowed more recreational buyers to bid against the killers. The downward trend continued for twelve years.

Long Economic Declines Mean Slaughter Increases for Breeding Stock

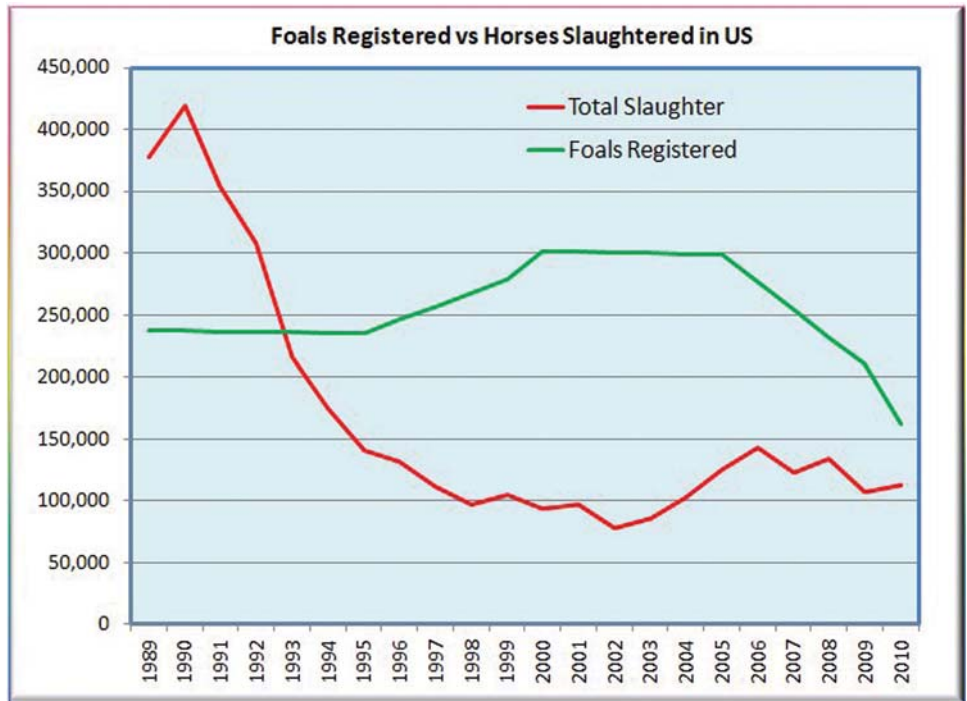
Now let's look at the period between 2008 and 2010. In a short economic decline, such as the recession of 2001, breeders hold onto their herds and weather the storm. When conditions improve, breeding recovers immediately. But with a long economic decline such as the one we are experiencing, breeders begin to sell off breeding stock.

What does this say? Because of the ready cash offered by the slaughter alternative, a large part of the breeding capacity of all breeds is cut down severely, and if and when conditions again improve it will take years for the breeding herds to be reestablished.

In a study (early 2008, www.animallawcoalition.com/horse-slaughter/article/541) of abuse and neglect statistics, we showed the clear linkage between unemployment and cases of neglect. We warned (Conclusion 5) that if economic conditions continued to decline we were in for a significant increase in equine neglect. Sadly, six months later we saw exactly that.

It is clear that the US cannot continue to slaughter horses at the current rate, and the longer it takes for the economy to revive, the deeper the damage to broodmare herds. Quarter horses and Paint horses have been hit the hardest with breeding down well over 50%. For those of us in rescue this is good news, but for organizations like the AQHA and the APHA it means that their decline has only just begun.


The longer the economy flounders, the longer horse prices will remain low and the more breeding stock that will go to slaughter. For a while this may give the appearance that excess horses are still a problem, but it will be the industry eating its seed corn.



New Horse Slaughter Facilities Not A Viable Option

In April 2009, North Dakota lawmakers commissioned a \$50,000 study on the feasibility of building a horse slaughter facility in the state. We have since learned that the findings were not positive.

Slaughter plants have never been very profitable in the US because the European Union (EU) distributors have a stranglehold on the marketing end of the industry. Only a plant owned by these corporations can survive economically. Natural Valley Farm's bankruptcy after only two years of killing horses for its EU masters is an excellent example.

Add to this the continual threat of legislation and the promised EU crackdown over drug residues in the meat, and the prospects for a horse slaughter plant are not good. Only time will tell if investors are willing to defy these odds and open a horse slaughter plant in the US, but regardless, slaughter will begin to decline soon. 

About the authors:

Vicki Tobin is a freelance writer, consultant for strategic procurement of technology, and co-founder of the Equine Welfare Alliance. She is heavily involved with horse slaughter research, wild Mustang protection and equine rescues, and serves on the board of directors of Manes and Tails Organization Equine Rescue. Vicki became involved in the horse slaughter issue at the prompting of family members who own a farm in rural Illinois.

John Holland is a freelance writer, industrial consultant, author of three books, and an advocate for horse welfare and humane treatment. He is co-founder and president of the Equine Welfare Alliance and serves as senior analyst for Americans Against Horse Slaughter. In 2005, he received the annual "Heart and Soul" award from United Animal Nations for his volunteer work against horse slaughter, and he frequently writes on the subject from his small farm in the mountains of Virginia, where he lives with his wife, Sheilah, and their 12 equines.

EWA is a 501(c)(4) umbrella organization representing over 200 member organizations and hundreds of individual members worldwide. EWA and its members are involved in a grass roots effort dedicated to ending the slaughter of American Horses and the preservation and protection of our Wild Horses & Burros on public lands. [EIN #27-3035982] www.equinewelfarealliance.org