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Contacts:

John Holland

540.268.5693

john@equinewelfarealliance.org

R.T. Fitch, President Wild Horse Freedom Federation

800.974.3684

rtfitch@wildhorsefreedomfederation.org

Horse slaughter pipeline to Mexico defies ban

Chicago (EWA) – A team of observers from EWA and WHFF were shocked by their findings today after they completed a tour of Texas horse slaughter holding facilities and transshipment points. The investigation ended with four days of monitoring the Eagle Pass border crossing where horses are exported into Mexico.

The European Union (EU) announced on December 8th that it would ban the import of horse meat from Mexico processed after January 15th. The announcement followed an audit in June by their FVO (Food and Veterinary Office). In an email to EWA, EU authorities explained, "The [2014 audit](#) confirms that the reliability of the guarantees on horse identification, traceability and medicinal treatment history remain very weak."

The mission of the team was to determine the impact of an EU ban which was expected to cause a significant drop in horses crossing the border on or shortly before the Thursday deadline.

The ban was expected to drastically reduce the flow of horses since according to Mexican statistics, available on line, 78% of all the horsemeat produced in Mexico is exported to the EU.

Furthermore, the audit showed that 87% of the meat produced in Mexican plants is derived from US horses.

Across the State the team found horses were still standing in pens and feedlots, waiting for shipment across the border. The immense feedlot at Morton Texas had fewer horses than normal, but otherwise the numbers were typical of any week. In 2014, an average of 2,026 US horses per week were sent to Mexico for slaughter, twice as many as went to Canada.

However the surprise came as the Thursday deadline passed with no notable decrease in the flow of horses through the Eagle Pass facility.

The issue of traceability was a key to the ban. US horses are not raised as food animals and routinely receive a wide range of medications, with no central record keeping. Spot testing repeatedly found both Canadian and Mexican horsemeat to be contaminated with prohibited and carcinogenic substances.

It is not as if the USDA has not attempted to address the issue. The National Animal Identification System (NAIS) database, a system of livestock traceability based on microchips, was launched in 2007, but abandoned some years later following technical failures, cost overruns and strong opposition from producers.

To meet EU food safety standards such a system would require, at the expense of horse owners, compulsory identification of all equines and equine-holding premises, strict recording of all drugs administered to equines and a tightening of veterinary drug prescription rules.

Russia, Vietnam and Hong Kong were the largest non-EU importers of Mexican horse meat, but together they were less than 22% of the total, leading EWA's John Holland to ask, "How could such a huge shortfall be made good in little more than a month?"

The audit that triggered the ban came in the wake of widespread cases of horsemeat having been found marked as beef in products throughout Europe.

While observing the Eagle Pass facility, the investigations team noted and reported several violations of regulations designed to protect horses going to slaughter from inhumane treatment. A similar EU decision is expected to be issued against Canadian horsemeat producers. Holland explains that, whatever the impact, it will not affect individual horse owners as much as sport horse owners, "Slaughter has long been the dumping ground for young horses coming off very short careers in racing, rodeo and other performance sports."

The Equine Welfare Alliance (EWA) is a dues-free 501c4, umbrella organization with over 330 member organizations, the Southern Cherokee Government and over 1,150 individual members worldwide in 23 countries. The organization focuses its efforts on the welfare of all equines and the preservation of wild equids. www.equinewelfarealliance.org

Wild Horse Freedom Federation (WHFF) is a registered, Texas non-profit corporation with federal 501(c)3 status. WHFF puts people between America's wild equids and extinction through targeted litigation against governmental agencies whose documented agendas include the eradication of wild horse and burros from public, federal and state lands. www.wildhorsefreedomfederation.org