

## Family gives up on horse-slaughter plant in New Mexico

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SANTA FE — Entrepreneurs who wanted to slaughter horses and sell the meat in Europe suspended their plan Tuesday, complaining that the federal government stalled them into submission.

Valley Meat Co., a family business near Roswell, gave up after four months of seeking approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for a horse-slaughter plant, said A. Blair Dunn, attorney for the business.

A spokesman for the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service in Washington said Tuesday night that the agency has not done horse inspections in six years and simply needs more time to make sure it handles the job correctly.

But Dunn said that his clients, the De Los Santos family that owns the meat-processing plant, no longer could subsist while awaiting for a decision from the USDA. The family instead is restarting its cattle business, probably as soon as Monday.

"They're suspending any plans for the horse-slaughter plant," Dunn said in an interview. "It doesn't look like anybody is going to get a grant of inspection for horse slaughter."

Neil Gaffney, the USDA spokesman, said no horse-slaughter plants exist in the United States, and approving one is not a simple process.

"Following a decision by Congress in November 2011 to lift the ban on horse slaughter, two establishments, one in New Mexico and one in Missouri, have applied for a grant of inspection exclusively for equine slaughter," he said. "The Food Safety and Inspection Service is currently reviewing those applications."

But, he said, the service had determined that that significant time was needed to update its testing and inspection processes. Only then will it be able to implement an inspection regimen, Gaffney said.

The collapse of the horse-slaughter plan disappointed one animal-protection group in New Mexico but heartened another.

Rusty Cook, president of the New Mexico Horse Council, had hoped the Roswell slaughter plant would go into operation.

Cook said horses now are abandoned, starved and hauled long distances for slaughter in foreign countries. The Roswell plant would have improved that situation, she said.

Cook said she had hoped Valley Meat Co. could keep its proposal alive until after the November election, in hopes that "the atmosphere" would be different then.

A different view came from Lisa Jennings, executive director of Animal Protection of New Mexico, and an opponent of the slaughter plant.

"New Mexicans want a truly humane safety net for horses," she said. "Now we can put this chapter behind us."

Gov. Susana Martinez, a Republican, and State Land Commissioner Ray Powell, a Democrat, both opposed horse slaughter in New Mexico. Martinez recently said she planned to send a letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture asking it to deny the company's application.

But on Tuesday, Martinez said through her spokesman that she had no comment on the project's demise.

The De Los Santos family had to retrofit its 7,000-square-foot plant to prepare for the slaughter and processing of horses. A meat-processing plant cannot slaughter cattle and horses simultaneously, Dunn said.

Even with the changes, the plant can accommodate cattle again, Dunn said.

He said the family had no expectation of selling horse meat in the United States, but it believed the food would be readily accepted in foreign markets, especially Europe.

"They thought they had a good opportunity for their business to expand," Dunn said.

He said his clients received other bad news Tuesday - a notice of an \$86,000 fine from the state Environment Department. The state alleges that Valley Meat Co. failed to register a composting site for manure and cow intestines.

Dunn said the company met every regulatory requirement, but the state at one point lost the application. He said the De Los Santos family was in full compliance with environmental laws.

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