



Horse slaughter, off the radar for too long, needs congressional attention

By Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) - 06/07/11 07:29 PM ET

Horse and burro protection occupies a very special place in the big idea known as “animal welfare.” Wild horses embody the Western spirit that has animated our national conversation about protecting animals and open spaces. Horses and burros form some of the strongest bonds with humans found anywhere in the animal kingdom.

There are really two issues when it comes to horse slaughter: the private domestic market for horse meat and federal management of wild horses. The former, although it’s been shrinking, is certainly not gone. The latter remains a major issue for lawmakers, federal agencies, activists, and everyone else who cares about how we preserve and protect our wildlife and public land. Both need more congressional attention.

When it comes to the private market, local officials have long been ahead of federal policy. The last three horse slaughter plants on U.S. soil were closed by state law enforcement in Texas and a 2007 court order in Illinois. California overwhelmingly banned horse slaughter over a decade ago. This is all good news.

Still, a permanent federal ban has never been passed. The House passed the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act in 2006 — and I was proud to vote for it — but the Senate failed to follow through.

That didn’t stop some of us from pushing forward: the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act of 2009, for instance, would have mandated a prison term of up to three years for possessing, shipping, transporting, purchasing, selling, delivering or receiving any horse meat for human consumption. That bill never became law, but it kept the conversation focused on setting meaningful standards, where it needs to be.

Despite the domestic market shrinking, eating horse meat remains legal at the federal level. Congress should pass a bill that outlaws horse slaughter once and for all. There’s no real argument against it, unless horse meat is your business.

Public lands policy is a related but different issue. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) still includes horse and burro slaughter as a “management” option in its toolkit. Just as seriously, American horses continue to be sent over the border for human consumption. Between January and September of 2010, approximately 53,850 horses were transported across our nation’s borders for slaughter in Mexico and Canada. That number amounts to almost 1,700 per week, or one every six minutes.

When the BLM conducts roundups and holds wild horses in pens, the horses suffer and taxpayers often see their money wasted. Horses react negatively to the stress induced by chutes, boxes, knives and stun systems, leading to immense suffering and inhumane deaths. Before that happens, many wild horses are subjected to rough transport conditions on their way to BLM holding facilities.

For more than 30 years, wild horses and burros had been protected under the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. These longstanding protections were removed by the Republican congressional majority in 2006. As explained by The Washington Post in a contemporary online item titled “The Story of Conrad Burns and Wild Horses”: “[U]nder existing laws and rules, wild horses may be delivered for free to people, who then can turn them around and sell them to third parties who may do whatever they want with them, even sell them for slaughter, because [BLM] has no interest in pursuing any sorts of investigations into such conduct.”

To put a stop to this, Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) and I introduced the Restore Our American Mustangs Act in 2009 to step up fertility control measures, encourage more animal adoptions and provide up to 19 million additional acres on which more than 60,000 wild horses and burros under federal control could roam freely. The bill provides a definition for the term “thriving natural ecological balance,” which appears in the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, but is not defined. The definition makes clear that management of horses and burros should seek to achieve balanced, multiple use of public lands, ensuring the health of all aspects of the range.

The bill passed the House in 2009 but — we’ve heard this before — the Senate didn’t pick it up. We shouldn’t leave horse slaughter, public or private, in the no man’s land it currently occupies. This is something Congress should act on as soon as possible.

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