

Own Responsibility with the Unwanted Horse Coalition

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Although the number is difficult to document, the Unwanted Horse Coalition (UHC) estimates that each year there are approximately 130,000-170,000 “unwanted” horses in the United States. The mission of the Unwanted Horse Coalition is to reduce the number of unwanted horses and to improve their welfare through education and the efforts of organizations committed to the health, safety, and responsible care and disposition of the horse. The UHC is an educational organization striving to provide resources to the public, horse owners, and those who hope to purchase horses in the future. It is not a political organization seeking to lobby for or against horse processing legislation. The UHC encourages us all to “Own Responsibility”, so how do we do that? How did we get to this point? And who really are the “unwanted” horses?

The phrase “unwanted horse” was first coined in 2005 by the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP). Unwanted horses are horses that are no longer wanted by their current owner because they are old, sick, injured, unmanageable, or fail to meet their owner’s expectations. They may be horses that are incurably lame, dangerous, are too expensive to care for, have behavioral problems, or many other reasons. Some unwanted horses are normal, healthy horses of various ages and breeds. The unwanted horse issue in the United States began to gain media attention in 2001, following the Foot and Mouth disease epidemic in Europe. This epidemic resulted in decreased consumption of beef and a subsequent increased demand for horse meat, which drew attention to horses being processed in the United States for human consumption. The number of unwanted horses in the United States has varied from year to year, with as many as 315,192 horses being processed in 1990 to 58,443 processed in 2007 (statistics from USDA Veterinary Services). In 2007, ±35,000 horses were exported to Canada for processing, ±45,000 were exported to Mexico for processing, ±21,000 un-adoptable feral horses were kept in Bureau of Land Management (BLM) funded long-term sanctuaries, ±9,000 feral horses were in the BLM adoption pipeline, and an undisclosed number were abandoned, neglected or abused. The types and genders of horses that are sent to processing plants reflect the demographics of the U.S horse population, with no specific gender or breed standing out as the quintessential unwanted horse.

According to the 2005 USDA National Animal Health Monitoring System Survey, the total mortality for horses in the United States is 3-4% per year. Broken down, approximately 167,000 horses (1.8%) 1 month old or older were euthanized or died, and approximately 112,000 horses (1.3%) were processed for meat. There has been minimal variation in these numbers over the last decade. Dr. Tom Lenz of the AAEP presents this critical question: *If the option of annually removing unwanted horses from the general horse population via euthanasia at a processing plant is legislated out of existence, will the horse industry be able to provide adequate care and accommodations for these animals or will the industry need to absorb the cost of their euthanasia and carcass disposal (estimated at \$186/per horse for carcass disposal)?* According to study results presented by North *et al* at the Annual World and Agribusiness Forum, it costs \$2,340 per year to maintain a horse. I think most of us would agree that it is a conservative number. Depending on the number of unwanted horses in a given year, it could be

as much as 234 million dollars per year to provide care for 100,000 horses. Unfortunately, a large source of funding for the care of these horses has yet to be identified.

Federal horse slaughter legislation efforts began in 2001 and most bills have not been passed or are still pending. In 2006, the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act was passed in the house but not considered in the senate. The horse industry was very concerned with this act, and the AAEP, American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA), American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and multiple others opposed the legislation. These organizations should not be considered “pro-slaughter”; they opposed the legislation because it had no infrastructure to address the welfare of horses no longer removed from the horse population. The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act did not address carcass disposal issues, did not provide an enforcement plan or agency, and did not provide funding to care for unwanted horses. The Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act of 2009 is the most current pending federal legislation. This act amends the Horse Protection Act and makes it illegal to sell or ship horses to slaughter for human consumption. It would also prevent the export of horses to Mexico or Canada for processing. Similar to the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act, but with additional amendments, the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act of 2009 is also opposed by many in the horse industry. On the other hand, the Horse Transportation Safety Act of 2009 (HR 305, Kirk), which prohibits transportation of all horses in double decker trailers, has been widely supported by most in the equine industry. The closing of the three horse processing plants in the United States (two in Texas and one in Illinois) were a result of state, and not federal, legislation. The closing of the U.S. processing plants, which were overseen by the USDA and their veterinarians, will now result in horses being transported longer distances without APHIS oversight and processed at foreign facilities not under the USDA’s jurisdiction. Legislation at the state level was introduced in Montana that may allow construction of horse processing facilities there. The Montana bill (HB 418), which promotes privately-owned horse processing plant development in that state, became a law in Montana on May 1, 2009. In short, however, most state and federal legislation related to these issues remains pending.

So what are the current options for unwanted horses? Ideally, many horses would benefit from a change in occupation, rescue or retirement, adoption, donation to a teaching and/or research program, or donation to a therapeutic riding program. Euthanasia at a processing plant in Canada or Mexico, and euthanasia at the request of the owner on a farm or at a clinic remain current options as well. Abuse, neglect, starvation, and abandonment are the outcomes that all in the horse industry are hoping to prevent. Horse rescue, adoption, and retirement facilities across the United States are making concerted efforts to provide care, funding, and suitable accommodations for these horses. The capacity of these facilities is unknown but certainly not endless, and the AAEP estimates that the current organizations in the U.S. could rescue, retire, or find homes for no more than 10,000 horses per year. We need to continue supporting the great work and efforts of these organizations.

The Unwanted Horse Coalition was established out of the Unwanted Horse Summit, hosted by the AAEP and American Horse Council in Washington, DC in 2005. The goal of this meeting was to develop a long range strategy to address the problem of the unwanted horse in the U.S. The meeting determined that we have a significant unwanted horse issue and that our current rescue and retirement facilities cannot accommodate 100,000 plus horses per year. As a large funding source is not available to address this issue, the summit determined a need for pre-ownership education and responsible horse ownership. The UHC was subsequently formed from a broad alliance of equine organizations under the American Horse Council in 2006 to raise

awareness on the issue and its consequences to horses and the horse industry. All members of the UHC are too numerous to mention but include the AAEP, AVMA, AQHA, American Humane Association, The Jockey Club, Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association, the American Paint Horse Association, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, and the U.S. Equestrian Federation. The UHC is working to educate horse owners and potential owners on alternative careers for horses, end of life decisions, and raise awareness of the issue and its consequences through their website (www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org), brochures, articles, and a national speaker program. Most of the educational resources and rescue/retirement facility lists are downloadable from the UHC website.

The UHC encourages us all to “own responsibility”. This means that before purchasing or breeding a horse, to consider all of the responsibilities associated with ownership – from care and medical needs to end of life decisions. We should consider all options available before horses become unwanted, and be aware of training and use of horses to enable them to have a long career and not become “used up”. The UHC also encourages all organizations, sales companies, and service providers in the horse industry to point out these responsibilities to newcomers. We need to work with federal, state, and local officials to ensure viable carcass disposal options exist for horses that have died or are euthanized. Hopefully, working together to educate and address this problem will prevent the large number of unwanted horses before they become unwanted. Additionally, the AAEP and Intervet Schering-Plough Animal Health have joined together for a non-profit program called The Unwanted Horse Veterinary Relief Campaign. This program distributes complimentary equine vaccines to rescue and retirement facilities throughout the U.S (additional information can be found at www.uhvrc.org). Please help us spread the word about this critical issue, and if you are interested in a speaker for your upcoming event, please contact the UHC at 202-296-4031.