

## Hope for the Horse

Fighting the slaughter of American horses. *By Christopher J. Heyde.*

Every year, tens of thousands of horses are hauled from all over the country to one of the two remaining United States-based, foreign-owned slaughter facilities, both located in Texas. There, they are processed into meat and sold as a delicacy in France, Italy and Japan. An estimated 30,000 additional horses are trucked to Canada and Mexico or flown to Japan to meet the same fate.

Until recently, few people in America knew that horses were being slaughtered here for human consumption—in Texas, for example, a recent survey showed that 89 percent of the state's residents were unaware that the industry existed. Middlemen, known in the industry as "killer buyers," travel from auction to auction, purchasing any horse they can—thoroughbreds, workhorses, Premarin® foals, federally protected wild horses and companion animals. In their hands, horses often are subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment. A Pennsylvania Police Equine Investigator from the New Holland Livestock Auction observed that "horses were deprived of food and water, because they were going to slaughter anyway."

Poorly trained slaughterhouse workers have been seen beating horses indiscriminately with thick fiberglass rods. Sadly, horses may suffer extreme pain from improper use of a "captive bolt gun," a device designed to render them insensitive to pain before slaughter.

### Legislative History

In 1949, in an effort to ensure that horsemeat was not substituted for beef, Texas enacted a state law prohibiting

the sale, possession and transport of horsemeat for human consumption. On the federal level, a first step was taken in 1971 when Congress, responding to the public outcry over the barbaric treatment and systematic eradication of America's wild horses, passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. Still, despite Congressional intent that "wild, free-roaming horses and burros shall be protected from capture, branding, harassment, or death," wild horses continue to be slaughtered each year.



If misused, a method of preventing pain can become torture.

A successful 1998 California ballot initiative banning the slaughter of horses and the transport of horses for slaughter was the first such law in the country. While horses were not being slaughtered in California, the vote sent a powerful message. In 2002, a similar initiative was attempted in Massachusetts, but because of signature-gathering fraud perpetrated against the orga-

nizers, it was not included on the ballot. Nevertheless, as public awareness began to increase, the number of horses slaughtered annually steadily declined from more than 300,000 in the early 1990s to just over 40,000 in 2002.

### Current Efforts

In February 2003, the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act was introduced, after several years of lobbying by Congressman John Sweeney (R-NY) and Congressman John Spratt (D-SC). This legislation prohibits the slaughter of horses anywhere within the United States, as well as the export of live horses intended for slaughter. This bill has broad support from horse rescue groups and national and local animal protection organizations, in addition to national and state horse industry groups such as The Breeders' Cup Ltd. and the National Thoroughbred Racing Association.

In 2002, the Texas Attorney General issued an opinion reaffirming the 1949 state law banning the sale and possession of horsemeat for human consumption, effectively rendering the industry illegal. Local prosecutors then initiated investigations into the operations of the state's slaughter facilities. Almost immediately, two efforts to defend the industry began in Texas. First, the slaughterhouses

joined forces with a company in Mexico to file a lawsuit in federal court attempting to stop enforcement efforts. At the same time, legislation was introduced in the Texas House of Representatives to overturn the 1949 law. However, the bill met with overwhelming opposition from Texans, and on June 3rd, 2003, was soundly rejected by the Senate. Currently, the slaughterhouses are still operating, pending a ruling on their request for a permanent injunction from the federal judge. AW

**WHAT YOU CAN DO** Horse slaughter can be halted with the passage of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. Contact your state representative and urge him or her to cosponsor the American Horse Slaughter Act (HR 857). To locate state representatives, visit [www.aspc.org](http://www.aspc.org).

*Christopher Heyde is the policy analyst for the Society for Animal Protective Legislation in Washington, D.C.*