

Society for Animal Protective Legislation

· a division of the Animal Welfare Institute ·

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Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection**

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The Society for Animal Protective Legislation (SAPL), a division of the Animal Welfare Institute, strongly supports H.R. 503, the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. SAPL has a long history in efforts to protect horses from cruelty. The Society played a leading role in the passage of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, which was enacted to ensure America's wild horses and burros would be protected from the cruel and inhumane practice of slaughter, among other things. Sadly, the Act was undermined when Senator Conrad Burns snuck a last minute rider into an omnibus appropriations bill in late 2004 allowing wild horses to be sold for slaughter. Thankfully, efforts are underway in Congress to undo this tragic maneuver.

The Society also worked with legislators back in 1984 on an amendment to the Export Administration Act of 1979, which prohibits the shipment of horses to slaughter via boat. Most recently, SAPL led the humane community's support on four separate decisive votes taken in Congress on amendments to appropriations legislation that prohibited all horse slaughter or that of wild horses. Not only does SAPL have a long history of fighting to end horse slaughter, but it is also clear from these votes that the American public and the US Congress share the same

concerns and desire to protect horses from the inhumane practice of slaughter for human consumption. Numerous public opinion polls from across the United States (<http://www.horse-protection.org/info.php?id=54>) demonstrate that the majority of American's oppose horse slaughter and support an end to the practice.

When my colleague Liz Ross and I first discussed this issue with former Representative Connie Morella back in the summer of 2001, and to Representative John Sweeney in late 2002, little did we realize the path this legislation would take. The issue's misrepresentation by the legislation's opponents has taken almost mythical proportion – despite the facts and support of an overwhelming majority of Americans and Members of Congress. Our opponents use misinformation and twisted facts in an attempt to convince you that ending horse slaughter will somehow be *bad* for horses, but you must keep one thing in mind: *they have no evidence to back up this claim*. Ending horse slaughter is right, and it is what is best for the horse.

I am one of few who have actually been inside a horse slaughterhouse (and seen “normal operations” as opposed to a carefully executed operation for demonstration purposes), attended livestock auctions where horses are bought for slaughter, followed horses being transported to slaughter and rescued horses from near-death. You may have heard some people who have only been inside a plant say everything was okay and they saw nothing wrong. But were they invited by the slaughterhouses? If so, I think it is fair to say the actions taking place during the tour were probably atypical. To get a real sense of what takes place inside these abattoirs, they should have gone in as I did, unannounced and with a veterinarian. We witnessed unimaginable cruelty which I'll describe to you later in my statement.

Since horses in the United States are not raised or consumed for their meat, the horse slaughter industry manages to avoid much of what little oversight exists. Until December 7,

2001, no regulations even existed in the United States to govern the treatment and care of horses during their transport to slaughter. The transport regulations that were adopted are wholly inadequate and may even legitimize animal cruelty. Horses are allowed to be hauled for up to 28 hours without food, water or rest. They are subjected to the full force of elements ranging from the blistering sun to freezing winds to pounding rains. The law and its subsequent regulations are rife with loopholes, as clearly explained by Texas attorney Laney Vasquez in her paper *Horse Slaughter Transport Fact Sheet*, which can be found at www.saplonline.org/horses.htm.

The horses end up at the slaughterhouse in a variety of ways, all unlucky. Sometimes they are sent by individuals or groups no longer able or willing to care for them. Sometimes they are retired or injured racehorses, riding school or show horses, federally protected wild horses, foals born as a by-product of the Premarin industry, or stolen horses. The majority is not actively sold to slaughter by their owners, but instead arrive at the slaughterhouse via livestock auction, often sold by owners unaware of their ultimate fate. Those purchased at auctions by individuals known as “killer buyers” may then be shipped on trailers for as long as 28 hours without water, food or rest – only to arrive at the slaughterhouse, where workers mishandle them right up to and including the point of slaughter. While double-deck trailers will finally be prohibited soon, if the horses slaughter plants actually cared about horse welfare, they could have prohibited use of this horrendous method of transport used by their “killer-buyers” ages ago.

When I visited a slaughterhouse, there was a double-deck trailer fully loaded with horses from Canada located at the rear of the nondescript facility. The horses filled both rows and were unable to stand normally, forced to keep their heads low. Despite the fact that several of the horses I could see had cuts and blood trailing from their mouths and noses, all looked otherwise healthy and fairly young. A few horses at a time were removed from the truck, so many were still

on board when I left 45 minutes later. Workers poked some of them with long fiberglass rods through holes on the side of the trailer. The horses, typically very sensitive animals, slid and fell down the ramp, only to be whipped by another worker's rod. All exhibited "flight" behavior, pacing in prance-like movements with their ears pinned back against their heads and their eyes bulging.

Once inside the building, I saw more callous workers beat the horses on the nose, forehead, neck, back or hindquarters to get them to move until they entered the kill chute. Egregious acts of cruelty took place right in front of me. Running across the floor of the barn was a grate-covered drain about three feet deep. A section of the grate was missing in one of the stalls through which horses were being forced. Because they were crammed into a space and panicking, each horse fell into the open hole, unable to get out since the floor was wet and slippery. Workers continued to beat the horses until, following a terrible struggle, they were able to throw their bodies out of this hole. This only stopped once I began to close the grate—only then did the workers take action. Just after this first incident and again due to the overcrowding and panic, a large male got one his legs hooked over one of the upper rails of the fence. Workers proceeded to beat him continually until he lunged forward, gouging his leg open on the solid metal fence and forcing his leg free of the rail. When the veterinarian and I tried to report the two incidents, we were unable to locate a US Department of Agriculture inspector in the facility. Sadly, the plants that defend their operations are quick to say things are fine within their facilities because USDA inspectors are present to ensure the humane treatment of animals. However, as I have testified above and ample USDA inspection reports show, cruelty and improper handling is a serious problem. In fact, according to a recent General Accounting Office report on the US slaughter industry, "the most prevalent noncompliance documented was the ineffective stunning

of animals, in many cases resulting in a conscious animal reaching slaughter.” Further, USDA is not present to witness the majority of handling of the live animals and the slaughter process, instead they are relegated to the final stages, observing the processing of the meat.

I left the slaughterhouse with a sense of disbelief at the magnitude of this brutal treatment. Despite what I had heard from the industry and its supporters, these horses were not old, sick or past recovery. They were adoptable, sellable, sound horses. And if a horse happens to be in bad shape, he or she should never be subjected to the long and arduous process involved in slaughter, but should instead quickly be humanely euthanized by a licensed veterinarian. How many similar horrific incidents take place at the other US slaughterhouses each day, without proper oversight? Many of those who are aware of this practice simply say the industry is a “necessary evil,” and slaughtering horses is a responsible way to dispose of animals who are ill, abused or no longer wanted. Horses are being slaughtered simply because the option exists as an easy means to dispose of the animals—people gain money from the practice, but the animals lose. Horses can be retired (<http://www.awionline.org/farm/horses/guidelines.htm>), and humane euthanasia (with the animal’s body possibly being sold for rendering) is preferable to inhumane slaughter in a commercial plant. Ninety-nine percent of horse owners already choose one of these humane and appropriate options.

Finally, I wish to talk about what may be the most disingenuous and reckless argument put forward by the pro-horse slaughter American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), American Association Equine Practitioners (AAEP) and American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) – that is the equation of horse slaughter with euthanasia. By no definition are these two distinctly different acts to be considered the same. These pro-horse slaughter organizations are business associations, promoting the business of veterinary medicine or quarter horse breeding,

and not welfare organizations. Opponents of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act portray horse slaughter as a form of humane euthanasia, citing the AVMA's classification of the captive-bolt as “acceptable” for euthanizing equines. This argument fails to acknowledge the vast difference between efficient administration of the captive-bolt by a highly trained veterinarian with appropriate restraint of the horse’s head (the AVMA specifies that the captive-bolt is acceptable “with appropriate restraint”) and its improper use by low-skilled slaughterhouse employees without proper head restraint. Improper use of the captive-bolt during slaughter means horses may endure repeated blows with the device and may be improperly stunned as they proceed through slaughter.

Recently, the immediate past president of the AVMA, Dr. Bonnie Beaver, has taken it upon herself to redefine the AVMA’s use of “with appropriate restraint”. By her new definition, your reading of this testimony counts as “restraint” since you are being “controlled” in some fashion. While the definition of restraint can vary, it always included some form of physical control. That may include a lead rope, someone’s hand on the harness or the actual physical restraint of the horses head to immobilize it.

Another recent misstatement by Dr. Beaver implies that horses, when realizing they can no longer escape from a threat, quietly submit. However, according to Dr. Lydia Gray an equine veterinarian, “horses are classified as fight or flight animals, preferring flight to quickly get them out of situations they perceive as dangerous but perfectly capable of fight when this is the only option. Unfortunately, this ‘run first and ask questions later’ approach often leads to injuries to themselves and anyone or anything around them, including their handler. Horses that panic have been known to drag people, crash through fences and even rear up and flip over backwards, breaking any ropes that tied them.”

In the years I have been involved in this effort, I have found that slaughter is inextricably tied to neglect and abuse, and the process certainly does not reduce it. Horse owners have the responsibility to prevent unnecessary suffering of these sentient creatures—and this includes avoiding cruel transport, handling and killing that are the *modus operandi* of the horse slaughter industry.

Finally, I would like to make clear that our involvement in this issue is born of our interest in reducing unnecessary suffering. We are not a vegetarian organization and this is not part of a secret agenda. On the contrary, the Animal Welfare Institute is working to ensure the sustainability of humane family farms rearing animals for human consumption. More than 500 family farmers comply with our care standards and we are regularly adding additional farmers.

Mr. Chairman, I close by again urging this Subcommittee and the US Congress to swiftly enact the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. Since starting this campaign in 2001, over 250,000 horses have been cruelly slaughtered. Further delay of this bill subjects an ever increasing number of horses to a tragic and preventable fate. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony, a letter of support from veterinarians and a letter of support from hundreds of business leaders, horse industry organizations and leaders, national humane groups and equine rescues from across the US to the Subcommittee in support of H.R. 503.