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Quarter horse policies part of the problem, not the solution

An opinion piece by Duane L. Burright

A few weeks ago, I wrote an opinion piece which argued why the opponents of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (AHSPA) are wrong. Among these opponents is the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA), whose standard argument against the horse slaughter ban is the old "unwanted horses" rhetoric that many people are familiar with. If you look at any of its public statements on the AHSPA, the AQHA always acts as though it is concerned about horse welfare. Since this organization keeps saying that we will be overrun by "unwanted horses" if the horse slaughter business is shut down, one would think that they would be doing something to keep the horse population in check.

But you'd be wrong.

The reality is that the AQHA recently registered their 5 millionth foal (see link: <http://www.aqha.com/news/2008%20Press%20Releases/182008fivemillionwinner.html>) and that in 2007 the AQHA reported 140,000 registered foals. That is almost five times the number of registered Thoroughbred foals for the same year and is very close to the number of American horses that were slaughtered in 2007 which, according to US Department of Agriculture records, totals 122,459.

So how is it that so many American quarter horses are brought into the world in one year? Three words answer this question, VOLUME VOLUME VOLUME, especially since the AQHA endorses the use of artificial insemination. Using this method, a quarter horse (QH) breeder can likely get 8 to 10 of his or her mares pregnant with just one visit to the farm stallion. Think about this for a moment. The AQHA keeps arguing that slaughter is needed to prevent the United States from being overrun by "unwanted horses" while QH breeders are busy churning out 140,000 registered foals in a year's time. Now if there is truly an "unwanted horse problem", why in the world does the AQHA appear to be sanctioning what could be referred to as "puppy mill" type breeding practices?

Quarter Horse breeders can make good coin on the horses which meet the breed group's conformation standards, as can be seen by Googling "Quarter Horses For Sale" (see link: <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=Quarter+Horses+for+sale>). As can be seen, the average quarter horse can fetch a good price which targets the well-to-do horse owner.

But what about the rejects, the horses which don't meet those "perfect" conformation standards of the breed? Records show that quarter horses seem to show up at the slaughter plants in very high numbers as compared to other breeds (<http://www.kaufmanzoning.net/horsemeat/DC/DCInventory10012004.htm>). It would appear large quarter horse breeding ranches dispose of horses that don't meet conformation standards by sending them directly to slaughter since they cannot sell the animal for the prices seen in my web search. This is the fate that their burned out breeding stock meets as well.

It does not appear to matter to them that many of these horses might make a good, cheap trail horse for someone who doesn't have a lot of money. These breeders have no interest in selling what could be considered a "grade" horse.

While doing some research I came across an article on the Animal and Plant Health Inspection (APHIS) / USDA website (http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/nahss/equine/eva/EVA_2006_Multistate_USAHA.pdf) describing an outbreak of equine viral arteritis which originated at a large-scale quarter horse breeding facility in 2006. Mare management practices at the affected QH farms were described as an "intensive 'feed lot' system."

When you think of a "feed lot" you think of a place where livestock such as cattle or hogs are fattened before slaughter. I certainly wouldn't characterize a feedlot with raising horses, but then I'm not the typical large-scale quarter horse breeder. When you consider that a former brand inspector at the now defunct Dallas Crown horse slaughterhouse described the quarter horse as the "slaughterer's breed" due to their bulky conformation and the records cited above, the feedlot reference becomes ironic.

Think about the profits quarter horse breeders can make by putting their industry's cast-offs on the dinner plates of the Belgians with horse meat fetching \$20 + per pound in that country. It's a profitable little side business for them. Since the AQHA is the mouthpiece of these breeders, perhaps this is the real reason the group is opposed to the AHSPA.

The position of the AQHA becomes clearer when you consider its support of practices that encourage the spewing out of thousands of new foals in a year's time while repeatedly claiming that slaughter is necessary to humanely dispose of "unwanted horses." I'd be willing to bet that the "unwanted horse problem" the AQHA and AVMA keep repeating like a broken record was really fabricated in a cigar-smoke-filled lobbyists' office - the type of place where Charles Stenholm (see link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Stenholm) and now Conrad Burns, known for the infamous "Burns Amendment" which basically gutted the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act of 1971 (see link: http://www.wildhorsepreservation.com/resources/burns_story.html), make their living.