

Equine Welfare: What IS Humane?

Perspective from the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association &
New Mexico Farm & Livestock Bureau

The issue of "humane" care and treatment of horses has become extremely volatile in New Mexico and across the nation in recent weeks. Unfortunately, the problem isn't nearly so recent. The issue has been in the national spotlight long enough that the Government Accounting Office (GAO) has had time to do an in-depth study, identifying the problems and pointing out challenges for the U.S. Department of Agriculture as well as horse owners and lovers.

What are the options and the alternatives for unwanted and feral horses? Where does the funding come from?

The focus should be on the quality of life for horses and the assurance for a humane end of life. Reality is that regardless of their use and the emotions tied to them, horses, like all animals, have limited lifetimes.

New Mexico currently has only nine (9) certified horse rescue operations. There may be others taking in unwanted horses, but only these nine are certified by the New Mexico Livestock Board who is charged with the responsibility of humane oversight of horses and other livestock in the state.

(<http://www.nmlbonline.com/index.php?id=23>)

These rescue operations are not government funded and operate largely on donations. Not only are these facilities not well distributed around the state, but capacity is limited. The ideal capacity for the entire group of certified rescues is 257 head --- those facilities are currently holding 266 horses.

Immediately prior to a sale, Southwest Livestock Auction houses up to 300 head of horses. Prior to the current investigation, Southwest routinely held four sales per month.

The cost of maintaining a horse varies with the age, size and condition of animal, but care and feeding just one emaciated horse, which is the condition most horses are in when rescued, can easily run from \$800 to \$1,000 per month, according to one rescue owner. Hay alone, which must be supplemented with grain, vitamins, and minerals as well as routine health care, presently runs at \$300 per month and up. Maintaining a healthy horse costs a minimum of \$150 per month.

Sadly, rescues are finding that when they do rehabilitate a horse, there are no permanent homes available for them. Additionally horses that cannot be rehabilitated then must be disposed of by the rescue.

New Mexico, including tribal lands, is home to literally tens of thousands of feral or unwanted horses. Because of the drought and current economic conditions the problem is growing literally by the moment. Families who were once able to maintain horses for enjoyment are now having to choose between caring for their families or their animals. A Coggins Test, which is required to transport a horse, costs \$35 per head. Farrier or horse-shoeing expenses can run from \$40 to \$120 per month per head for regularly maintained horses, plus mileage. Horses that have been neglected can be exponentially higher.

According to a 2005 survey by the American Horse Council Foundation, which included a breakout survey for eight states including New Mexico, nearly 100,000 New Mexicans are involved in the equine industry. Within that group 72 percent of New Mexico horse owners have an annual household income of \$75,000 or less. The report also states that 76 percent of these owners are 30 to 60 years of age with only 13 percent under the age of 30.

When horses can no longer be cared for, the options for disposition are limited and cost prohibitive. While landfills have the option of accepting animal carcasses, few choose to and they come with strict

requirements including an appointment to bring the carcass, a veterinary certificate indicating that the animal did not succumb to an infectious disease, and payment of special charges for heavy equipment and operators. These costs can easily add up to \$300 per horse carcass. That is added to the cost of euthanasia, which if done by a licensed veterinarian costs \$150 and up. Then the animal must be transported from its location to the landfill, which can cost from \$180 to \$220.

On-site burial requires heavy equipment and a permit from the Public Regulatory Commission, with unknown impacts to water quality.

Selling unwanted or feral horses presents an entirely different set of problems. According to the GAO report, the price of horses has dropped dramatically since 2007 because there is little salvage value due to limited options for marketing. Many auction markets will not even accept horses and most of those who do will accept only those that are in healthy condition. The markets that do accept horses in lesser condition find that they soon are the recipients of numerous horses that are left, often in the dead of night, which places a greater burden on limited Livestock Board resources.

Horses that go through auction markets that are not purchased as working or pleasure horses are destined for slaughter plants in Mexico. Those animals are loaded onto trailers averaging 30 head or more and trucked to the Mexico border. There they are unloaded and put on another truck to cross the international border. They are unloaded and put on yet another truck to travel up to 17 hours into the interior of Mexico for slaughter. Once the animals cross into Mexico, they are not subject to any US oversight and many of these plants are not subject to inspections.

Mexico will not accept intact studs (males) or pregnant mares. Feral or unwanted studs must be castrated, which if done by a veterinarian, can cost \$300 per head. If not done by a veterinarian, there are sanitary and recovery time issues. Mares are often allowed to foal, with the offspring left behind when shipped.

Numerous unwanted horses are merely hauled to an open space --- including private, federal, tribal or state lands. There they are either turned loose to fend for themselves or perhaps shot on-site. These horses create grave concern for livestock owners and managers due to the potential for disease transmission. Individual reports are that horses are routinely abandoned on tribal lands near Albuquerque leaving the tribes to deal with disposal.

Because of New Mexico's border with Mexico, the state is recipient of unwanted horses from the entire nation. This compounds the number of horses in distress that New Mexico is home to.

There are numerous other facets to the current unwanted or feral horse problem that will require more in-depth consideration. Under the current drought with little water and forage available horses are doing an incredible amount of resource damage. Horse hooves have an entirely different impact on the ground than cloven hoofed animals, compacting the soil rather than breaking it. Horses are also in competition with other domestic livestock and wildlife for scarce resources.

On the subject of animal cruelty investigations, New Mexico statistics follow the results found by the GAO. The New Mexico Livestock Board reports the following animal cruelty investigations from 2004 to present. The vast majority of these were horses. Not all of the investigations were founded, but required time and resources none the less.

2004 – 53
2005 – 38
2006 – 56
2007 – 41
2008 – 117
2009 – 128
2010 – 90

July 2011 to March 2012 – 91

The Board changed over to fiscal year statistics in 2011, so this number is skewed because the first 6 months of 2011 are not reported. The estimated calendar year number for 2011 would be well over 100. Since the U.S. Department of Agriculture stopped inspection at horse slaughter plants in the U.S. in 2007, New Mexico's cruelty investigations have doubled on an annual basis.

Because of the varied nature of these investigations, it is impossible to provide a cost to the Livestock Board and the ranchers in New Mexico who fund the Board through inspections and mill levys even though the investigations are on behalf of all New Mexicans.

That GAO report entitled HORSE WELFARE: Action Needed to Address Unintended Consequences from Cessation of Domestic Slaughter was published in June 2011 and can be located at: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11228.pdf> . In brief here is the object of the report and findings on cruelty.

Since fiscal year 2006, Congress has annually prohibited the use of federal funds to inspect horses destined for food, effectively prohibiting domestic slaughter. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for overseeing the welfare of horses transported for slaughter.

In 2007, Congress directed GAO to examine horse welfare since cessation of domestic slaughter. GAO examined (1) the effect on the U.S. horse market, if any, since cessation; (2) any impact of these market changes on horse welfare and on states, local governments, tribes, and animal welfare organizations; and (3) challenges, if any, to USDA's oversight of the transport and welfare of U.S. horses exported for slaughter. GAO analyzed horse price and shipping data, and interviewed officials from USDA, state and local governments, tribes, the livestock industry, and animal welfare organizations, and reviewed documents they provided.

GAO found that since domestic horse slaughter ceased in 2007, the slaughter horse market has shifted to Canada and Mexico. From 2006 through 2010, U.S. horse exports for slaughter increased by 148 and 660 percent to Canada and Mexico, respectively. As a result, nearly the same number of U.S. horses was transported to Canada and Mexico for slaughter in 2010—nearly 138,000—as was slaughtered here before domestic slaughter ceased in the U.S.

Comprehensive, national data are lacking, but state, local government, and animal welfare organizations report a rise in investigations for horse neglect and more abandoned horses since 2007. For example, Colorado data showed that investigations for horse neglect and abuse increased more than 60 percent from 975 in 2005 to 1,588 in 2009. Also, California, Texas, and Florida reported more horses abandoned on private or state land since 2007. These changes have strained resources, according to state data and officials that GAO interviewed.

USDA faces three broad challenges in overseeing the welfare of horses during transport to slaughter. First, among other management challenges, the current transport regulation only applies to horses transported directly to slaughtering facilities.

A 2007 proposed rule would more broadly include horses moved first to stockyards, assembly points, and feedlots before being transported to Canada and Mexico, but delays in issuing a final rule have prevented USDA from protecting horses during much of their transit to slaughtering facilities. In addition, GAO found that many owner/shipper certificates, which document compliance with the regulation, are being returned to USDA without key information, if they are returned at all. Second, annual legislative prohibitions on USDA's use of federal funds for inspecting horses impede USDA's ability to improve compliance with, and enforcement of, the transport regulation. Third, GAO analysis shows that U.S. horses intended for slaughter are now traveling significantly greater distances to reach their final destination, where they are not covered by U.S. humane slaughter protections. With cessation of domestic slaughter, USDA lacks staff and resources at the borders and foreign slaughtering facilities that it once had in domestic facilities to help identify problems with shipping paperwork or the condition of horses before they are slaughtered.