



# Options for Horses

Compiled by Rusty Cook, President of the New Mexico Horse Council

Nationally, the Unwanted Horse Coalition estimates there are at least 170,000 unwanted horses. Native American tribal authorities estimate there are perhaps an additional 100,000 horses roaming free on tribal lands. Nobody knows how many there are on federal, state and private lands but the number is considerable.

Horse owners are faced with skyrocketing feed prices, shrinking markets, and limited options for dealing with horses they no longer want. We need permanent short term solutions to deal with the horses already born, and long term solutions to reduce the number of horses born in the future.

Long term solutions include more responsible breeding of high quality, sound, athletic horses and castration of all stallions not needed for breeding. The New Mexico Horse Council sponsors Operation Gelding to assist owners with the cost of castration. A 2012 grant from the Unwanted Horse Coalition was matched by the Horse Council. Short term solutions include re-homing, euthanasia and slaughter.

In 2012, the US Congress passed a bill allowing USDA inspection and oversight of horse processing facilities in this country, after a hiatus of five years. The USDA tracks the number of animals shipped to Mexico. During those five years the number of horses going to slaughter in Mexico increased by 600%! In the first three weeks of 2013 there were 6,958 total animals shipped to Mexico, over 89% of which were horses destined for slaughter.

An alternative to slaughter is to raise enough money and provide enough facilities to take care of unwanted horses for the rest of their lives. The life span of the average horse is 25 to 30 years. In round figures and on the low side, it costs at least \$100/month to feed a horse (not including veterinary and farrier care). For the 170,000 unwanted horses estimated by UHC, that's \$17 million a month. Over the next 25 years, if the number does not increase, it adds up to a staggering \$5.1 billion. In 2010, the USDA reported that 138,000 horses were shipped to Mexico for slaughter. If that were no longer an option, there would be a total of over 300,000. Feeding them would cost over \$30 million a month.

In New Mexico there are currently about 300 animals in the nine licensed equine rescue shelters according to the Livestock Board. Those shelters are full. A tax check off program has been proposed, to be administered by the Livestock Board. If it were to raise the very optimistic amount of \$30,000, an average of \$100/horse/year could be distributed to the shelters, or enough to feed each horse for ONE month. It would require an additional \$360,000 to support all the horses at the rescues. Another proposal is that any tax money be used to support seized horses only until ownership is transferred by the courts, which would make the money stretch a little farther but would still leave the equine rescues with a huge fundraising challenge.

## What options do horse owners have if they can no longer care for their animals?

- Option:** Sell your horse to a new owner. A healthy horse can have a second career, or be a pasture mate for another.
- Option:** Lease your horse. A partial or full lease to someone who can use the horse may be possible.
- Option:** Donate your horse to a worthy organization such as a therapeutic riding program, police department, equine college or university, horse rescue, or horse retirement facility.
- Option:** Turn the horse loose on public, private, or tribal land. This is illegal.
- Option:** Have your horse humanely euthanized by a veterinarian. According to the American Association of Equine Practitioner's National Fee and Market Study, the average fee for euthanasia by a veterinarian is \$66, not including carcass disposal by burial, rendering and incineration. Fees for disposal range from \$75 to \$250 for rendering and up to \$2000 for incineration.
- Option:** Send the horse to a processing facility for slaughter. This can be done humanely when regulated by the USDA.

We must take the emotion out of this issue and face it logically, and that is the intent of this paper. We simply cannot save every unwanted horse. Nobody is forcing anyone to send their horses to slaughter, but given the huge number of unwanted horses, and the limited resources for dealing with them, ALL options must be left open.

## Euthanasia vs. slaughter: what is the difference? Definitions from Webster's Dictionary:

**Euthanasia** - painless killing to relieve suffering; the act or practice of killing an animal that has an incurable illness or injury.

**Slaughter** - the killing of animals for their meat and other products.

- ✓ **Euthanasia** employs use of lethal injection (poison), gunshot or captive penetrating bolt gun, administered by a veterinarian. **Slaughter** employs use of a gunshot or captive penetrating bolt gun, administered by a trained technician.
- ✓ **Euthanasia** and disposal costs a horse owner \$300 or more. Sale for **slaughter** may put a few hundred dollars in the owner's pocket.
- ✓ **Euthanasia** is done by a veterinarian, usually close to where the horse lives. **Slaughter** must now be carried out in foreign countries, usually after a long and stressful ride in a crowded truck with no food or water, and little oversight of methods used.
- ✓ **Euthanized** animals must be disposed of by burial, cremation, or in a landfill where no part of them can be used for any productive purpose, and may create a new set of environmental problems. **Slaughtered** animals yield meat fed to zoo animals, and other useful products including fat for soap, candle making and biodiesel; glue; hides; bone meal; and fertilizer, with little waste left. These products currently must be imported.