

Hold Your Horses



PHOTOS BY ABBY WHITE

Equine experts say the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act is a bad idea.

by **Boyd Kidwell**

Paxton Ramsey has taken up one of the most unpopular causes in America. Ramsey recently appeared before Congress to persuade lawmakers not to pass the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. Of course, Ramsey is up against tough opposition. Hollywood heavyweights such as Bo Derek, Clint Eastwood and Paul McCartney are among the many celebrities supporting a ban on horse slaughter.

Despite the odds, Ramsey is gambling that common sense will eventually overcome emotional arguments.

“We have 60 horses, and we ride every day at our ranch. I hope none of our horses get to the point that we need to sell it to a slaughter plant, but I’d still like to have sale for slaughter as a management option,” the cattle producer from Devers, Texas, says.

The most compelling reason for cattlemen

to oppose the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act is that the legislation sets a dangerous precedent for regulating animal welfare, Ramsey notes.

“The people who are pushing this legislation will use this issue as a stepping-stone to ban the slaughter of other livestock,” the Texas rancher says. “This bill basically says that you can follow all regulations in terms of humane treatment, transport and processing, but we’re still going to ban horse slaughter simply because some people find the practice disturbing. If we allow that to happen, what’s next?”

Coming together

So what chance does an unknown cattleman have against movie stars and animal rights activists? Surprisingly, 200 organizations are siding with Ramsey on the issue. Two of these are the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

NCBA opposes the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act because it bans the processing of horses for reasons other than science, safety or public health. NCBA maintains that a vote for the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act is a vote against animal agriculture in the U.S. and is a vote for the legislation of America’s animal agriculture industry based on emotion — not science. A ban on slaughter is also an undue limitation on the property rights of horse owners, according to NCBA’s position.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) is actively pursuing defeat of the horse slaughter prevention act because it doesn’t believe the legislation adequately addresses the long-term welfare of unwanted animals.

Since a horse is typically worth only about \$350-\$500 for slaughter, that choice is a last resort for most owners. However, 92,000 U.S. horses were processed for export in 2005. Most of those animals were not serviceable for various reasons or were dangerously bad-tempered. Approximately \$26 million worth of horsemeat was exported in 2005 from three U.S. processing plants. Most of the horsemeat is exported to Asia and Europe.

If horse slaughter is banned, veterinarians are concerned that equine rescue facilities will be overwhelmed and that there’s no

► **Above:** Slaughter is viewed as a last resort for owners of unwanted horses. Even so, 92,000 U.S. horses were processed for export in 2005.

government oversight of these facilities. Additional money will be needed to provide a regulatory body to oversee long-term care of unwanted horses.

Providing basic care for a horse costs about \$1,800 to \$2,200 per year, resulting in needed funding of more than \$200 million annually. As the number of unwanted horses increases each year, the annual cost will rise accordingly, according to AVMA.

Texas A&M Veterinarian Bonnie Beaver represented the AVMA in congressional hearings on the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act.

“Our position is that veterinarians care about the humane treatment of horses while they are alive and a humane death when that time comes,” Beaver says. “The slaughter plants use a humane method of euthanasia. No one has addressed what will happen to the horses that are not slaughtered each year, relative to their long-term care.”

Finally, AVMA points out that most of the alternatives to slaughter (burial, landfill, composting, rendering or cremation) create environmental problems. The cost to dispose of a horse carcass varies from state to state (\$10 to \$1,500), depending on the regulations. There is also concern about soil contamination from euthanasia drugs in buried carcasses.

If horse slaughter is banned, many of the 90,000 unwanted horses would need to be euthanized due to old age, illness or injury. The American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) has also joined the opposition to the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. “We oppose the legislation as it’s presented,” Tim Case of AQHA says. “There’s no stipulation in the legislation that covers long-term care of unwanted horses. We also believe that a horse is personal property and an owner can do what he or she believes is in the best interest of the horse as long as the animal is treated humanely.”

A team of nine university professors from four states recently wrote a report on the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act for the Animal Welfare Council. If horse slaughter had been banned in 2005, the cost of maintaining unwanted horses would have been \$220 million. If the slaughter ban had been in effect during the past five years, the costs of caring for



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unwanted horses would have been more than \$500 million, according to the professors. That money would have to come from either horse owners or taxpayers.

Banning slaughter could also have a negative effect on the Wild Horse and Burro Adoption Program. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) currently has 32,000

wild horses and burros waiting for adoption. Providing care for an additional 90,000 unwanted horses each year would negatively affect the adoption chances for wild horses and burros, according to the report.

The other side

The most popular argument by proponents of the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act is that horses are companion animals and deserve the same rights as cats and dogs. Proponents of the slaughter ban also suggest that horse owners should think carefully before breeding mares and consider adopting their next horse from an equine rescue organization. Finally, proponents recommend that horse owners plan for their animal’s eventual death by setting aside money to pay for euthanasia by a veterinarian.

Proponents of the horse slaughter ban have additional concerns that include:

- transportation to processing facilities in crowded livestock trailers;
- brutal treatment at processing facilities;
- slaughter of stolen horses; and
- slaughter of wild horses.

For many years, the sale of wild horses for slaughter was prohibited. However, an amendment in 2004 loosened the regulations to allow the slaughter of more wild horses. After negative publicity about wild horse slaughter, Congress again changed the law and the slaughter of wild horses is banned except for animals deemed unfit for adoption.

In one of its last votes before the November election, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 263-146 in favor of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (H.R. 503.) The bill may soon go before the U.S. Senate.

“It’s important that people in every state contact their Senators,” Ramsey says. “We still have a fighting chance to defeat this proposal. But the other side is ahead right now.”



Editor’s Note: H.R. 503 American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act was passed by a 263-146 vote Sept. 7 in the House. The issue may be taken up in the Senate at any time.

For more information

For information about the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act, visit these web sites:

- www.animalwelfarecouncil.org
- www.avma.org
- www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/equine_protection/get_the_facts_on_horse_slaughter.htm
- www.beef.org (click Cattle Industry News)
- www.equineadvocates.com/slaughter.html