

The Plight of the Unwanted Horse: Scope of the Problem

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For the past 15 years, on average, approximately 1-2% (75-150,000 horses) of the domestic equine population in the United States is sent to slaughter each year¹, with another 10-20,000 US horses being exported to Canada each year for slaughter and, an unknown number of horses being sent to Mexico for that purpose as well (eg: \cong 4000 in 2004). In 1998, slightly more than 1% of the domestic equine population was sent to slaughter (approx. 75,000 horses). In comparison, according to the 1998 National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) Report, 1.3% of horses age 6 months to 20 years (approx 80,500 horses) on all premises surveyed either died or were euthanatized in 1997, while 11.1% of horses greater than 20 years of age (approx. 55,000 horses) on all premises surveyed either died or were euthanatized in 1997.² Assuming these numbers are at least somewhat representative of what occurs annually, almost 200,000 deceased horses (3-4% of the total equine population) must be disposed of annually, one-third of which are being processed for human consumption, with the remainder being rendered, buried, disposed of in landfills, cremated, or "digested".

"Unwanted horses" represent a subset of horses within the domestic equine population determined by someone to be no longer needed or useful or their owners are no longer interested in or capable of providing care for them either physically or financially. Some unwanted horses will find new accommodations; however, most

unwanted horses will likely be sent to slaughter with fewer numbers being euthanized and disposed of through rendering or other means, and still fewer simply abandoned and left to die of natural causes. Unwanted horses range from being essentially normal, healthy horses of varying ages and breeds to horses with some type of disability or infirmity; horses that are unattractive; horses that fail to meet their owner's expectations for their intended use, eg: athletic ability; horses with non-life-threatening diseases; horses that have behavioral problems; or horses that are truly mean or dangerous. In many cases, these horses have had multiple owners, have been shipped from one sale barn, stable, or farm to another, and have ultimately been rejected as eligible for any sort of responsible, long-term care.

When the number of unwanted horses mentioned above are combined with the 10,000 or so feral horses being maintained by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on privately owned sanctuaries deemed to be un-adoptable or unwanted and 5,000 or so horses being held in short-term holding facilities operated by the BLM awaiting adoption plus some 20,000 or so displaced pregnant mares and their foals from the Pregnant Mare Urine (PMU) industry, one can readily see that the number of truly and/or potentially unwanted horses constitutes a significant number of horses to be dealt with each year and in the future.

To their credit, various equine welfare organizations, breed-specific organizations, and numerous benevolent equine welfare advocates and horse owners have made a conscientious and concerted effort to either provide care for unwanted horses, provide funding for the care of unwanted horses, or to find suitable accommodations for them in both the private and public sector. These efforts, along with widespread efforts to

inform the public about the plight of the unwanted horse, and a relatively high demand for horses by prospective buyers presumably accounts for the nearly 80% decrease in the number of horses being sent to slaughter over the past 10 years. The carrying capacity for these retirement farms, rescue farms, and sanctuaries, as they are called, is unknown at this point, but despite their noble efforts to provide care for many unwanted horses, the number of unwanted horses far exceeds the resources currently available to accommodate them all. The estimated cost of providing basic care for a horse range from \$1800-\$2400 per animal per year.³ Even well-meaning volunteers can become overburdened with unwanted horses, at times to the detriment of the horses under their care. Currently, there simply are not enough volunteers, funding, or placement opportunities for all of the unwanted horses.

Why are there so many apparently unwanted horses? Is there, as some would suggest, a glut of horses in the United States today? Was there, then, an even larger glut of horses when 200-300,000 horses were being sent to slaughter in the late '80's and early '90's? For the past 5-10 years, the demand for horses on the part of those buying horses has been very good. Over the years, however, this demand has certainly run in cycles that frequently follow other economic trends. In general, when the demand for horses is low, then the number of unwanted horses increases, irregardless of what their bloodlines may be. Recent changes in various breed organizations' rules, such as permitting the use of embryo transfer and frozen semen, have favored the production of horses, allowing breeders to produce more than one offspring per year from mares, and allowing breeders to more efficiently select for horses with desirable bloodlines or performance records. New technology will further facilitate this practice in the future.

Unfortunately, even with the help of technological advances, not every mating will produce a horse that meets the expectations of an owner or buyer. For those in the business of breeding and raising horses, an unsold horse becomes a liability rather than an asset.

Currently, to the author's knowledge, there is a lack of information about the demographics of unwanted horses other than the generalizations made previously, ie, not marketable, disabled or infirm, unattractive, lacking athletic ability, dangerous or mean. A more detailed study investigating the demographics of horses deemed to be unwanted would allow the horse industry to focus more appropriately on the problem. For example, former racehorses are frequently singled out as examples of unwanted horses when their racing careers end and they are not candidates for breeding or other athletic endeavors. There are undocumented estimates suggesting that less than 10% of the horses that go to slaughter are Thoroughbreds, but just how many of the 80,000 or so horses that went to slaughter last year in the US and Canada were former racehorses? What is the average age and sex of those unwanted horses? What are the types of things that cause them to be unwanted? Are they purebred or grade horses? Answers to questions such as these and many more need to be addressed to be able to understand the problem and potentially reduce the number of unwanted horses.

Whenever there are large numbers of unwanted horses as there are today, there is always concern for the welfare of these horses. According to Rebecca M. Gimenez, PhD, a member of the advisory board of the South Carolina Awareness and Rescue for Equines organization, in a letter to the editor in the April, 2004, issue of a prominent horse magazine⁴, "we have seen a huge upsurge in abuse and neglect cases over the last three

years in our state alone.” She goes on to say “looking on the web and talking to veterinarians, farriers, and horse industry professionals all tells me that this isn’t only a South Carolina problem.” Neglect of horses takes many forms and is due to a variety of factors. Could this upsurge in neglect, referred to by Dr. Gimenez, be due to solely to an increasing number of uninformed horse owners unfamiliar with the proper care of horses; or could it be due purely to economic constraints created by the downturn in the economy since 9/11; or could it be due to the availability (or lack thereof) of affordable ways to responsibly dispose of unwanted horses brought about by regulations prohibiting burial of animal carcasses in some locales, costs associated with veterinary euthanasia and disposal by cremation, “digestion” or rendering, or fewer slaughter plants processing horses for human consumption? All of these factors must be considered when faced with this large number of unwanted horses and what should be done with them, always ensuring they are treated humanely and with dignity until the end of their lives

References

¹National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), Agricultural Statistics Board, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1998 Report. www.usda.gov

² National Animal Health Monitoring System Equine '98 Study. Part 1: Baseline Reference of 1998 Equine Health and Management, United States Department of Agriculture/Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. September 1999. N280.898 www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ceah/cnahs/nahms/equine/Equine98/eq98pt1.pdf

³ North MS, Bailey D. 14th Annual World Food and Agribusiness Forum, 2004

⁴Gimenez RM. Letter to the editor re: unwanted horses. *The Horse Magazine* 2004; 21(April): 30.