

# Horse Rescue Alternatives to Slaughter

December, 2010

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## **THERE IS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE CONTINUED SLAUGHTER OF U.S. HORSES IF THE COMMERCIAL EQUINE INDUSTRY PARTICIPATES**

According to its proponents, if the slaughter of America's displaced horses in Canada and Mexico were to be halted tomorrow, there would be approximately 100,000 needing to be dealt with each year by alternative means which they claim do not exist today.

Those that would continue the practice of disposing of these companion animals, never bred or raised to be part of the food chain, and that totals only about 1% of the total U.S. population of horses each year, argue that equine slaughter for human consumption abroad is the only economical way to handle what they call the "unwanted" horse problem.

The purpose of this paper is to prove that not only does an alternative already exist, but that it can be quickly expanded to accommodate America's not unwanted but displaced horses if the commercial equine industry will stop using slaughter as a dumping ground for its byproduct and participate in providing for the true welfare of the animals upon which its businesses are based.

Elimination of horse slaughter would also remove the present incentive for bad equine husbandry and therefore reduce the number of displaced horses in itself by the simple laws of supply and demand, and also serve to improve the quality of all breeds.

That total of 100,000 horses sounds overwhelming until broken down by the number in the pipeline at any one point in time, and that is the factor that makes the alternative viable.

One hundred thousand horses annually translates to 8,333 per month. Divide this number by the 48 contiguous states these horses are found in and the average is only 174 per month per state. Broken down even further into the weekly cycle of livestock auctions and the number of horses that actually must be dealt with at any one point in time is on average only about 40 per week in each state.

The ultimate solution for homeless horses is to reduce this number dramatically through more responsible breeding practices, a massive public education effort to make both current and potential owners aware of their lifelong responsibility to companion animals that can live 30 years and other measures. However, a viable interim alternative for re-homing displaced horses does exist today if the commercial equine industry and the horse rescue sanctuary community join forces instead of battling over this issue.

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It is indeed a sad state of affairs that all over the country equine rescuers are being forced to bid against kill buyers to save horses, using financial resources that could better be used for expanding and caring for those in their sanctuaries and foster home networks. These are supported almost entirely by charity with virtually no help from the \$102 billion a year industry from which the problem stems.

Proponents of equine slaughter claim that the nation's horse rescue sanctuary resource is inadequate to handle displaced and neglected horses and many are even trying to revive equine slaughter in the United States based on this premise.

The fact is that leading equine rescue sanctuary operators across the country have developed innovative new programs since the recession began in 2008 to save more horses than ever displaced by the economy. This places them in a unique position today to immediately play a major role in re-homing and caring for the country's displaced horse population at this time, thus eliminating the perceived need for equine slaughter while long term measures are implemented to reduce the numbers needing re-homing in the future.

Another myth being perpetuated at the moment by those who do or would profit from equine slaughter is that the nation's equine sanctuary resource is at capacity due to the current economy and therefore there is no place for homeless horses to go other than slaughter. The simple fact is that rescue sanctuaries are and always have been at capacity. When a space opens up either to adoption or loss of a horse due to natural death or euthanasia brought about for medical reasons, another immediately takes its place. That is the way they have always operated.

Programs such as in-place rescue, in which dedicated but financially challenged horse owners are provided direct aid to keep their animals in safe homes, have prevented thousands from being neglected or displaced already and these efforts are being expanded. The innovative Oregon Hay Bank program, created and operated by horse rescuers, has kept 800 horses in their current homes since January 2009 in that state alone.

A recent survey by the National Equine Resource Network revealed that about 20 per cent of all rescue sanctuaries responding have similar feeding programs in place in their areas of operation across the country, effectively doubling and tripling their actual resident capacity since every horse that doesn't need to be rescued provides a space for one that does.

Further, the population of horses in sanctuaries is in constant flux, with openings occurring on a regular basis. A recent study by the University of California Davis indicates that four out every five horses that are taken in by rescue sanctuaries are then adopted out to new private owners, creating a constant stream of openings for more needing re-homing.

A national pilot program, funded by a private donor, is already in place this winter in which 1,000 horses are targeted for in-place rescue with aid to qualified owners ranging from hay and feed, farrier and vet services and even facility repair when safety or containment are a factor. A total of \$200,000 has been provided to selected rescue sanctuaries around the country for this equine crisis intervention program, and that translates to an investment of only \$200 per horse on average to keep these horses in their current homes and out of the displaced population.

All America's horse rescue community needs to provide a viable alternative to slaughter is the financial

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support of the equine industry itself, and a simple way to provide this is to add a long-term care and re-homing surcharge to the fee for every horse being registered in the country each year.

The various U.S. breed registries add approximately 500,000 horses to their rolls each year, and a surcharge of \$25 (which could be viewed as a one-time long-term care insurance premium for these animals) would provide \$12,500,000 annually toward making sure they never suffer the horrors of the slaughterhouse. This plan would cost the registries nothing because the cost is passed along to the end consumer, the horse owner.

Since all breed registries have in their mission statements that they are dedicated to the welfare of their horses, this is a much more moral and ethical way to honor those commitments and would unquestionably resonate well with their ultimate constituency, individual horse owners themselves. If the funds being used for lobbying by the major breed organizations today to keep slaughter are redirected to re-homing and long term care when necessary instead, it would add millions more to this effort.

## **SIX – POINT PLAN TO ELIMINATE THE SLAUGHTER OF AMERICA’S HORSES**

The following programs are not theoretical, but have already been developed and implemented by the country’s equine rescue community, and if expanded by funding from the industry, can eliminate the perceived need to send our horses off to slaughter for human consumption abroad in a relatively short period of time.

1. The creation of state and regional managed reserves to hold large numbers of horses safely until they can be absorbed back into the system. HSUS has already established two of these as a model and the cost for quartering and properly caring for each horse is miniscule compared to those on smaller sanctuaries. These can be established and operated by existing rescue organizations in each state working cooperatively and sharing the facility. Since much of America’s farm and ranch land lies fallow at this time and many states have provisions for taking those dedicated to animal sanctuaries off the tax rolls, land owners will have the incentive to donate the use of these on long-term lease arrangements, thus minimizing the cost of establishing them.
2. Selected expansion of existing sanctuary capacity for rescues that establish business plans allowing them to accommodate and care for additional horses in their operations if more facility space is provided. Already many leading sanctuary operators around the country have expanded their rescue herds to deal with the crisis caused by the economy, and many more could if provided with the necessary funds to do so. Simply stated, if sanctuaries are at capacity, make them larger so they can accept more horses.
3. Expand existing and develop new sponsored foster home networks in which rescued horses are placed and supported with private individuals who have the facility and desire to keep horses, but are financially unable to. Interestingly, the economy has created more candidates for this than ever before as owners have had to give up their own horses, but still have the facility to provide a home for those owned by nonprofit sanctuaries. The largest pure equine sanctuary in the country today has the majority of its rescued horses placed in foster homes in three states and many others have these on a smaller scale, so the experience and expertise for helping other sanctuary operators develop them quickly is

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already in place. The cost for keeping a horse in a foster home is a fraction of that for one quartered on a sanctuary itself since there is no fixed overhead expense.

4. Expand the concept of in-place rescue to keep more horses with dedicated and committed owners in their current homes with temporary financial or feeding assistance. Currently there is a nationwide pilot program in place, privately funded, in which a small number of selected nonprofit sanctuaries provide local horse owners who qualify with financial assistance for feeding, minor vet procedures, farrier work and other equine needs if they agree to a sustainability plan to keep their horses. This is considered a hand up, not a hand out and the goal of this program is to keep 1,000 horses in their current homes this winter. The investment to do this average only \$200 per horse and this program can be rapidly expanded nationwide since the mechanics are already in place. Still another established program is emergency feeding assistance efforts being carried out throughout the country. The Oregon Hay Bank was mentioned earlier and there are many smaller ones operated by rescue sanctuaries themselves. With funding from the equine industry these efforts can be expanded immediately and directly benefit its end consumer, the private horse owner.

5. The creation of state and regional training centers and networks, in which younger, healthier horses, which represent most of those going to slaughter today, can receive the training they need to lead productive lives and therefore be much more eligible for adoption to new homes. This can be based on the existing T.R.O.T.T. program for off-the-track Thoroughbreds which has been successfully implemented in California and the various mustang training competitions designed to make wild horses more adoptable. Again, there is nothing to invent in a program such as this, there are models already in place. Although some rescue sanctuary operators have the ability to train the younger, healthier horses being saved today, having this availability for those who do not would make many more of the horses in their herds adoptable, thus creating openings for more displaced horses. Also placing rescued horses in centers or with private trainers in these networks would provide temporary quartering for them, further alleviating the strain on the sanctuaries themselves.

6. A relatively new development in equine rescue, a growing network of sanctuary operators who work together to place horses they cannot accept themselves, has saved literally thousands of horses in the past two years. An informal regional group of only 11 in the Pacific Northwest has been able to place over 400 by posting horses needing new homes and sharing information. The establishment this year of the National Equine Resource Network provides a vehicle for not only creating and formalizing a national placement network, but also can be a resource for effectively distributing funding from the industry as envisioned in this paper. Currently there are two individuals who post horses daily needing re-homing that are listed directly or on various websites, and their records more than anything else belie the claim that only unwanted horses go to slaughter. The owners posting the vast majority of these horses have found themselves unable to keep them due to unemployment and other reasons created by the economy and are desperate to find them new homes to avoid slaughter for their beloved animals.

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## CONCLUSION

There is an almost immediate and viable alternative to the continued slaughter of America's displaced and homeless horses. It will require the country's commercial equine industry and horse rescue sanctuary operators to join forces, with rescuers taking on the task of implementing the programs described above and others, and the industry accepting financial responsibility for its byproduct. It's first and foremost about the welfare of the horses.

There can be no debate that the plan offered here is much more humane than slaughter in terms of their welfare. Public sentiment is overwhelmingly against equine slaughter. Every true horseman, no matter what their position on the issue today, would like to see it end. In one way or another, it will either through legislation banning it or economic conditions such as the new regulations imposed on horse meat in Europe decimating the market. Now is the perfect time to act proactively and find a solution that works for all concerned, especially for our horses.

*End.*