



## Frequently Asked Questions About Unwanted Horses in the United States

### **What is an unwanted horse?**

Unwanted horses represent a group of horses within the domestic equine population that are no longer needed or useful, or their owners are no longer interested in or capable of providing financial or physical care. Unwanted horses generally range from being normal, healthy horses of varying ages and breeds to horses that are unattractive, horses that fail to meet their owner's expectations for their intended use (such as athletic ability), horses with non-life threatening diseases, horses that have behavioral problems, or horses that are mean or dangerous.

In many cases these horses have had multiple owners and have been shipped from one sale barn, stable, or farm to another without finding a permanent owner or long-term care.

### **What is the scope of the problem?**

Currently there is a lack of information regarding the total number of unwanted horses existing in our nation. However, it is widely believed that many unwanted horses are sent for processing, and United States Department of Agriculture statistics indicate that more than 80,000 U.S. horses were processed in U.S. facilities in 2005. This represents approximately one percent of the U.S. horse population. Fewer numbers are euthanized by a veterinarian and disposed of through rendering, and still fewer are simply abandoned and left to die of natural causes.

Adding to these numbers are nearly 8,400 wild horses and burros deemed unadoptable by the Bureau of Land Management and which federal law now allows to be sold at auction. The Unwanted Horse Coalition recently conducted a survey to assess the population of unwanted horses in the U.S., and the results will be released later in 2009.

### **What factors create large numbers of unwanted horses?**

The success of the horse industry depends, to a large extent, on the buying and selling of horses. Over the years, the demand for horses has run in cycles that frequently follow other economic trends. The AAEP estimates that the minimum yearly cost to care for a horse, not including veterinary and farrier expenses, is \$1,825. Add in veterinary and farrier costs as well boarding expenses in some cases, and the yearly cost for keeping one horse can easily reach \$5,000. In general, when expenses are high and the demand for horses is low, the number of unwanted horses increases, regardless of the breed of horse.

Other factors, such as uneducated owners, irresponsible breeding and lack of owner responsibility, also create circumstances where the horse cannot be cared for or it simply does not meet the expectations of a buyer.

### **Do unwanted horses face an increased risk of neglect and/or abuse?**

Whenever there are large numbers of unwanted horses, there is always concern for the welfare of these animals. Neglect of horses takes many forms and is due to a variety of factors. Some reasons may include an increasing number of uninformed horse owners unfamiliar with proper horse care; economic constraints created by a downturn in the economy; and lack of affordable and accessible ways to dispose of unwanted horses in some locales.

There is no central system in the U.S. for reporting and maintaining data about equine neglect cases, so it is hard to quantify the level at which neglect is occurring. However, depending on the location, some equine veterinarians and others involved with horse rescue have noted an upsurge in abuse and neglect cases in the last three years. In the state of Colorado, equine cruelty investigations increased by 40 percent in 2007.

### **How do equine rescue and retirement facilities impact the unwanted horse population?**

Several excellent equine rescue and retirement facilities operate in the U.S. and play a vital role in providing lifelong care or finding new owners for unwanted horses. Some of these groups are registered as nonprofits and others are privately run by individuals or families. There is no national body that provides oversight or accreditation for these facilities, however.

The key issue is the total number of unwanted horses that can be cared for permanently or placed with a new owner by existing facilities. Care capacities typically range from five horses per facility to, in a few cases, a maximum of 1,000 horses. The capacity of most facilities, however, is 30 horses or less. Despite the efforts of these groups to care for unwanted horses, the number of horses exceeds the resources currently available.

### **What other options exist for unwanted horses?**

In addition to possible placement in a rescue or retirement facility, a horse owner can work to find a new home for the horse or sell the horse at auction in hopes of attracting a new owner. Many horses that are not sold at auction to a private owner are purchased by buyers for processing companies that operate in Mexico or Canada, where the animal is euthanized by captive bolt and then its meat sold for human consumption.

A horse owner also can choose to have his or her horse euthanized by a veterinarian. According to the AAEP's National Fee and Market Study, the average fee for euthanasia by a veterinarian is \$66. This fee does not include disposal of the carcass. Approved methods of carcass disposal vary widely from state to state, but commonly include burial, rendering and incineration. Fees for these methods range from \$75 to \$250 for rendering (depending on location) up to \$2,000 for incineration.

### **How is the AAEP working to address this issue?**

Driven by its mission to protect the health and welfare of the horse, the AAEP is leading the effort to improve the quality of life for unwanted horses. The Unwanted Horse Summit, hosted by the AAEP in April 2005, was an unprecedented meeting designed to bring together all segments of the equine industry to address this issue. The Summit served as the catalyst in generating practical and far-reaching solutions designed to reduce the number of unwanted horses and increase humane and responsible care. From that Summit emerged the Unwanted Horse Coalition, an effort now directed by the American Horse Council to educate and communicate to horse owners and industry groups about unwanted horses.

In addition to hosting the Summit, the AAEP has developed care guidelines for equine rescue and retirement facilities. The association is also partnering with Intervet/Schering Plough to provide free vaccines to rescue and retirement facilities. Many AAEP members provide veterinary care free of charge to individuals or facilities who care for unwanted or abused and neglected horses.

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