

# **A Perspective on Equine Slaughter from the Field**

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*The following is a summation of Dr. Grandin's remarks that were delivered via videoconference on April 19, 2005.*

#### **Perspectives on How People View the Issue**

One important point to consider at the outset of the discussion of the slaughter issue is the recognition of the existence of a cultural disconnect between people who live in cities and those that live in rural areas. Many times individuals who formulate opinions about controversial issues pertaining to slaughter or other agricultural topics do not have first-hand exposure to the reality of the situation in the field. It seems that the more people are isolated from the field experience, the more extreme are their opinions, either for or against the issue. People who are directly involved in the field experience tend to be more moderate in their point of view. There is a need for increased education of the general public, particularly in the areas of biology and animal science. People who have extreme views on slaughter need to visit processing facilities in order to get a first-hand understanding of what goes on there. Most people who do visit these processing facilities find that while they may not enjoy the visit, the conditions there are not nearly as bad as they imagined. Legislators need to be in touch with the reality of conditions of sale, transport and processing facilities. Education is the key to reducing the degree of disconnect between legislators and the realities of the field.

#### **USDA Study of Equine Slaughter Facilities**

In 1999 I studied 1,000 horses at slaughter facilities and found that 92% of the horses that were presented to slaughter facilities were in acceptable condition. Eight percent of these horses had some sort of significant welfare problem, including trauma, or emaciation. Fifty-one percent of the horses with welfare problems had evidence of fighting injuries. Seventy-seven percent of the horses with welfare problems were a direct result of owner neglect prior to shipment to slaughter. Although stallion aggression is an obvious concern, some mares and geldings can be just as aggressive as the stallions. The worst offenders are horses that lack the socialization skills ordinarily learned at an early age. Horses raised in isolation don't learn the normal "give and take" involved in herd interaction. One and ½ percent of the horses with significant welfare problems were judged unfit for travel.

#### **Striation of the Meat Processing Industry and the Role of the Consumer**

There is "striation" of the meat processing industry that is particularly well defined in the meat and pork industry. There are "high-end" organic food producers, large commercial plants that are monitored by programs such as that run by McDonalds Corporation that require their suppliers to adhere to well-defined welfare standards. Finally, there are the "low-end" processing plants that serve a market that is largely unregulated. The horses that were shipped to processing facilities in the worst condition

were shipped to slaughter facilities from low-end “junk” dealers. Legislation may have some impact on the care of animals in processing facilities, but the real key is the economic pressure that can be brought to bear by the consumer. Meat processing plants that do not meet the standards of the consumer (McDonalds) are eliminated from the program, leading to significant loss of income for those plants. This financial incentive forces them to make whatever changes are necessary to bring them into compliance.

### **Unintended Consequences to the Elimination of Slaughter**

There are alternatives that are worse than slaughter. Horses that are shipped out of the country to Mexico or other Central American countries are often placed in an environment where people are often faced with severe economic constraints. If an individual must choose between feeding his family or his horse, the horse will come out on the short end of the stick. Many of the horses exported to these countries from the U.S. pull a cart or are ridden to death while suffering from severe malnutrition. Some of these horses are shipped to Mexico where their condition deteriorates and then they are returned to slaughter plants in Texas. Legislation designed to eliminate slaughter is well intentioned, but there are significant consequences that need to be considered. Throughout the United States the potential for neglect or abandonment will increase if slaughter is banned without provision for dealing humanely with the horses that would ordinarily be sent to slaughter. In my opinion, equine slaughter represents a desirable alternative to abuse, neglect, or being worked to death in a state of malnutrition.

### **Issues Unique to the Equine Slaughter Problem**

Dogs and cats produce litters of offspring. Neutering these animals has had a significant effect upon reducing the numbers of unwanted animals. Horses usually produce a single offspring and most stallions are gelded at an early age, so neutering horses probably will not be as effective in reducing the number of unwanted horses as it has been in reducing the numbers of unwanted dogs and cats. Horses live for a very long time and are expensive to keep. Disposal of horse carcasses is a very important issue since there are both environmental and regional political concerns that may limit the options available to some communities.

### **Breeding Concerns**

Single-trait breeding of cats, dogs, cattle, pigs and horses have lead to unintended consequences that can cause owner disillusionment or productivity problems for these animals. Responsible breeding means that we have to consider the long-term consequences of our breeding programs and act in the best interests of the animals.