

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare

December 15, 2022

Congressman Frank Pallone
Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Richard Durbin
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. Senate
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives
2322 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Charles Grassley
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. Senate
152 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Durbin, Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member Grassley, and Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers:

Re: Support for the SAFE Act (H.R. 3355/S. 2732)

While it is beyond our scope as veterinary professionals to comment on the culinary practices of individuals, the health and safety of any animals under our care is a responsibility and trust that we hold dear. The continued existence of the horse slaughter industry – which claims the lives of tens of thousands of American horses each year and subjects these animals to serious mistreatment – is directly incompatible with safeguarding equine welfare. Additionally, the practice of horse slaughter poses significant public safety risks due to the potential for tainted meat to enter into the food supply.

Horses, unlike traditional food animals in the United States, are not raised or medicated during their lifetime with the intent of one day becoming human food. Indeed, during their lifetime, American horses receive a wide array of medications and treatments that are expressly prohibited by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use at any time during the life of food animals. Simply put, the toxicity concerns are too great when it comes to meat produced from horses living in the United States.

The welfare concerns associated with horse slaughter are significant and exist long before the animal physically enters into the slaughterhouse (e.g., unacceptably long transport conditions without adequate food, water, or rest, as well as crowding on feedlots). That said, the slaughter process itself is worth addressing. Animals must be rendered unconscious prior to being butchered – yet this baseline standard is virtually impossible to meet with horses in commercial processing facilities as their physiology and strong flight reflex typically results in panicked horses thrashing their necks. The U.S. Department of Agriculture documented appalling welfare problems when horse slaughter operated domestically. Subjecting horses to the same cruelty abroad is simply untenable.

Veterinarians for Equine Welfare spoke directly to the “total disregard of the animals’ welfare” in testimony to lawmakers on earlier federal legislation to end horse slaughter.¹ Footage of the slaughter process has shown terrified horses trying to run or jump their way out and slipping on bloody metal floors. Moreover, “[b]ecause of the unsuitability of the slaughter setup, captive bolt operators were often trying to hit a moving target and in some cases were unable to locate the kill spot on the horses’ forehead because the horse had turned around, slumped down, or moved backward in the kill box.”²

As veterinary professionals we can speak with authority on the distinction between horse slaughter and euthanasia – under no circumstances, should the two be conflated. Euthanasia involves a comparatively short and painless death; the aim is to minimize the discomfort and distress of the animals. Established methods exist to euthanize horses (e.g., lethal injection, gunshot to the head) and should be utilized when the need arises. There are several methods of environmentally safe carcass disposal available to horse owners everywhere. National veterinary groups have adopted a new method for the chemical euthanasia of horses that mitigates concerns raised by proponents of horse slaughter about the rendering or burial of horse carcasses. “Kill buyers” – as the brokers who supply horses to foreign slaughterhouses are called – procuring horses from unsuspecting owners is a far cry from anything pertaining to euthanasia.

Ending the slaughter of American horses for human consumption is well within our country’s reach. The number of horses being exported to Canada and Mexico for slaughter has declined precipitously over the last decade. And despite claims by proponents of horse slaughter, many viable solutions exist to help with at-risk horses – e.g., affordable veterinary castration and euthanasia programs, hay and feed relief networks, and the rise of equine rescues and sanctuaries across the United States.

Americans cherish their companion animals, and horses, who have played a vital role throughout our nation’s history, are no exception. As veterinary professionals who have sworn an oath to prevent animal suffering, we strongly support the Save America’s Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act (H.R. 3355/S. 2732) and any effort to permanently end horse slaughter in the United States.

Sincerely,

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Dr. Emily Alnutt
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Dr. Susan Aiello
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Dr. Chris Anderson
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Dr. Christine Aiken
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Dr. Jill Bailey
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¹ Dr. Nicholas H. Dodman, BVMS MRCVS. Veterinarians for Equine Welfare. Testimony Before the US House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security. Hearing on H.R. 6598, the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act. July 31, 2008. Available:

https://awionline.org/sites/default/files/uploads/legacy-uploads/documents/Dodman_073108_attach-1236060587-6707.pdf

² Ibid.

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