



THE UNWANTED HORSE AND H.R. 503: AN EQUINE VETERINARY PERSPECTIVE

As the world's largest professional organization dedicated to equine veterinary medicine, the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) comprises over 8,000 veterinarians and veterinary students who dedicate their life's work to caring for the horse. The AAEP brings together leading veterinarians from the areas of general practice, surgery, reproduction, sports medicine, research and academia in the pursuit of a common mission: to protect the health and welfare of the horse.

The Unwanted Horse and H.R. 503

Guided by this dedication to equine welfare, the AAEP is actively involved in the issues that surround the care of unwanted horses in the United States. The AAEP evaluates all legislative efforts, such as H.R. 503, based on the legislation's ability to serve the health and welfare of the horse. The intent of H.R. 503 is to ban the transportation and sale of horses for slaughter for human consumption and other purposes. The AAEP believes slaughter is symptomatic of a larger problem affecting the welfare of our nation's horses, and this problem is created by issues surrounding unwanted horses.

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. In some cases the horses are infirm or dangerous. Currently, there is a lack of information regarding the total number of unwanted horses in the U.S. However, it is widely believed that many unwanted horses are sent to a processing facility. 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.

Based on U.S.D.A. figures, over 80,000 U.S. horses were slaughtered in 2004, representing approximately 1 percent of the domestic equine population. According to the AAEP's position on the issue, horses destined for a processing facility should be:

- Treated humanely and with dignity;
- Transported according to guidelines approved by the U.S.D.A. in 2002 regarding the commercial transportation of equines to slaughter; and
- Euthanized in a humane manner in accordance with guidelines established by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

The AAEP believes that slaughter is not the ideal solution for addressing the large number of unwanted horses in the U.S. However, if a horse owner is unable or unwilling to provide humane care and no one is able to assume the responsibility, humane euthanasia by captive bolt at a U.S.D.A.-regulated facility is an acceptable alternative to a life of suffering, inadequate care or abandonment.

AAEP Concerns Regarding H.R. 503

While H.R. 503 and its supporters are well intentioned, the passage of this legislation, without adequate funding or an infrastructure in place to care for unwanted horses, will create a series of unintended consequences that negatively impact the health and welfare of the horse. Therefore, the AAEP opposes H.R. 503 as it is currently written.

The AAEP's chief concerns regarding H.R. 503 are:

- **Long-term placement of affected horses.** H.R. 503 fails to address how and where unwanted horses will be placed if slaughter is banned. If H.R. 503 is passed, over 80,000 U.S. horses will need to be placed in alternative homes, or be euthanized and disposed of properly. While there are many equine rescue and retirement facilities providing homes for unwanted horses, their care capacities range from five horses to, in a few cases, a maximum of 1,000 horses. The capacity at most facilities, however, is 30 horses or less.

In the first year alone of a slaughter ban, assuming an average capacity of 30 horses per facility, nearly 2,700 additional equine rescue facilities would be needed. Based on these numbers, there are not enough volunteers or placement opportunities currently to provide the level of care that will be required annually.

- **Funding of care for unwanted horses.** H.R. 503 does not address the funding required to care for or dispose of an additional 80,000 horses per year. Assuming an average cost of \$5 per day to provide a horse's basic needs, the funding needed per year, per horse is approximately \$1,825. This does not include veterinary and farrier care. Inadequate funding often creates inadequate care, which is a significant welfare concern for unwanted horses.
- **Ambiguous language of the bill itself.** H.R. 503 seeks to prohibit the shipping, transportation, moving, delivering, receiving, possessing, purchasing, selling or donation of horses and other equines to be slaughtered, **and for other purposes**. "Other purposes" is not defined and, if taken literally, could mean the transportation of horses for any reason, including sporting events, sales, recreation or transportation for medical care. This language is detrimental to the equine industry as a whole and if not addressed, could have unintended consequences.

Current Legislative Status

H.R. 503 was introduced on February 1, 2005 by Rep. John Sweeney (R-20th/NY) and was referred to the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Address the Root Cause, Not the Symptom

The equine industry must work together to address the core issues that contribute to the number of unwanted horses in the U.S. To mobilize key stakeholders, the AAEP is sponsoring an Unwanted Horse Summit on April 19, 2005 to begin generating far-reaching and practical solutions. From this meeting, we expect specific action plans to be developed that proactively address such issues as increased long-term care options and funding, responsible ownership, conditions of sale and transport, and increased euthanasia options for unwanted horses.

The American Association of Equine Practitioners, headquartered in Lexington, Ky., was founded in 1954 as a non-profit organization dedicated to the health and welfare of the horse. Currently, the AAEP reaches more than 5 million horse owners through its over 8,000 members worldwide and is actively involved in ethics issues, practice management, research and continuing education in the equine veterinary profession and horse industry.