

Keynote: Unwanted Horses

BY ERICA LARSON

Equine welfare and the growing population of horses needing homes are quickly becoming some of the major challenges veterinarians face on a daily basis, according to Tom Lenz, DVM, MS, Dipl. ACT, who delivered the keynote speech entitled “Horse Welfare Wars: When Emotion and Fact Collide” at the convention. Lenz reviewed how he believes the issue of unwanted horses arose, urging veterinarians to confront the issue and educate owners on how they can help combat it, while offering some suggestions on how the industry as a whole might greatly reduce the number of unwanted horses in America.

According to Lenz, the problem is not one that’s likely to be resolved quickly and easily: “The more you know about the unwanted horse issue, the more complicated the solutions become,” he noted.

Unwanted horses, said Lenz, are horses that are no longer wanted by their current owners because they are old, injured, sick, unmanageable, or simply fail to meet the owners’ expectations. “Welfare is defined as the physical and psychological state of the animal,” Lenz said. He added that good welfare is generally described as meeting the horse’s physiological, psychological, and safety needs.

Lenz believes the closing of American equine processing plants is one of several issues that led to the proliferation of unwanted horses and equine welfare situations. Others include the economic recession, which has decreased the market for horses, and irresponsible ownership that has resulted in overbreeding in some segments of the industry.

“We don’t eat horsemeat in America, but we had three plants that processed horses for human consumption (in other countries),” Lenz said, reflecting on the early days of the anti-slaughter movement in



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the United States. He explained that a nationwide controversy began as the public learned that these plants processed horsemeat for human consumption.

The issue is “complicated by a worldwide love affair with the horse,” he said. “Uninformed people with few to no ties to the equine industry care for horses and want to have a voice in how they are treated.”

The controversy led to some federal government officials introducing legislation that would close all the equine slaughter plants in the United States. After being approached by a government agency to provide an opinion on the situation, several AAEP veterinarians—including Lenz—traveled to Texas to evaluate the welfare conditions at the processing plants.

He said the team found that the horses awaiting processing were receiving good care, their welfare was not compromised at any time from arrival to time of slaughter, and that the horses were being euthanized in a humane manner under USDA veterinarian supervision.

Lenz admitted that transportation of horses to processing plants was an area of concern, however, as many horses were, and still are, transported in double-decker trailers meant for cattle. He reported that

there is currently legislation introduced in the House of Representatives to eliminate the use of double-decker trailers to transport horses anywhere in the United States.

“The AAEP’s position is not pro-slaughter—we support HR 305 (the Horse Transportation Safety Act of 2009) but oppose HR 503, which would outlaw the processing of horses for human consumption, because there are no provisions in the bill to provide for the care of unwanted horses, to designate an agency to enforce the law, or funding to support them,” Lenz said.

Despite the AAEP’s findings, the three equine processing plants closed due to state regulation in 2007 and according to Lenz, the number of unwanted horses in the United States began to rise shortly thereafter.

Years later, the negative effects of the closures are present more than ever, he said, noting that the action polarized the horse industry; the anti-slaughter contingency refused to reason with the pro-slaughter groups and vice versa. In addition, the average price for a mid- to low-end horse has plummeted due to the high numbers of them now available.

He also said that there has been a significant increase in abandoned and neglected horses because owners have few options if they are unable to sell, donate, or rehome their unwanted horses. As a direct result, about 70% of the United States’ rescue, retirement, and retraining facilities are at or near capacity, he explained, citing the 2009 Unwanted Horses survey conducted by the Unwanted Horse Coalition.

Another issue that arose during the processing plant controversy and the expansion of the unwanted horse issue was the increase in animal activist group activity. This, according to Lenz, has led to an increase in awareness among the public.



“Our views on animal welfare are conditioned by our personal knowledge base and life experiences,” Lenz said. The general public without a background in horses has only the knowledge they obtain from the activist groups; the activist viewpoint is usually fairly extremist, he added.

On the positive side, Lenz said, the amount of unwanted horses and the concerns about equine welfare have stimulated positive action in the horse industry. Rescue groups have taken in thousands of horses that have fallen into the unwanted category, and AAEP veterinarians have vaccinated thousands more horses cost-free to help the animals remain healthy as they begin new chapters in their lives.

Even with the support of equine rescues and groups like the AAEP, finding a solution for the unwanted and neglected horse problem remains a challenge for equine practitioners and the industry in general.

“There is no definitive answer,” Lenz said. “In a perfect world all welfare solutions would be based on science, such as

(the horses’) health and biological function (as opposed to emotion). In reality, though, science is often ignored if society believes something is wrong.” Lenz added that emotions often take over because society views animal welfare as a moral issue rather than a scientific issue, and people tend to be quick to blame when someone cares for animals differently than they would.

“We must learn to accept that there is a societal aspect to horse care and use, and also that different perspectives are valid,” he continued.

Lenz cited responsible ownership as one of the simplest solutions to the unwanted and neglected horse problem. He also suggested that although reopening the processing plants (with greater regulation over the transportation of the horses) might not be the ideal option for dealing with unwanted horses, it would aid greatly in controlling the number of unwanted horses in America until the industry can develop resources to eliminate the need.

Next, he suggested looking at the big

picture for a solution. Overemphasis on one point is counterproductive, he added. By dismantling a situation and analyzing each aspect of the animals’ welfare, he explained, a full understanding of whether the situation is truly unethical is easier to come by. For example, solely looking at the feed a horse is offered or the amount of time they are kept in—or outside of—a stall on a daily basis does not provide an accurate reading of whether a caretaker is infringing upon a horse’s welfare.

Finally, he suggested that the horse world come together and work for the ultimate goal: to stop horse neglect and control the unwanted horse population in America.

“We as veterinarians have to take a firm position in the middle, and be willing to make a change,” he concluded. 🐾

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