



AWI FACT SHEET

The Save America's Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act (H.R. 1661/S. 775)

Tens of thousands of American horses are shipped abroad each year to be killed for human consumption. Horses are subjected to grueling transport, rough treatment, and an inhumane end of life. The Save America's Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act, led by Reps. Vern Buchanan (R-FL) and Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) in the House and by Sens. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) in the Senate, would prohibit the slaughter of horses in the United States for human consumption, as well as the export of live horses for the same purpose.

BACKGROUND

Horses are an integral aspect of our culture as companions, athletes, iconic wild animals, and work partners. One thing they are not is food for our dinner plates. A recent national poll found that 83% of Americans oppose horse slaughter for human consumption.¹

No commercial horse slaughter facility has operated in the United States since 2007, and annual appropriations bills have included a provision barring USDA inspection of such facilities, thereby preventing the resumption of commercial horse slaughter in this country. This does not establish a permanent ban, however. The provision must be approved each year, and a failure to include it in FY2012 and 2013 appropriations legislation spurred efforts in several states to reestablish horse slaughter operations.

Meanwhile, thousands of American horses are still slaughtered each year after being transported long distances to facilities in Canada and Mexico. From 2008 through 2023, over 1.4 million American horses suffered this fate. And while numbers have declined dramatically in recent years, tens of thousands of American horses continue to enter the slaughter pipeline annually, primarily to serve European and Asian markets.

WELFARE ISSUES

The suffering begins long before horses even reach the slaughterhouse. Horses are crammed into crowded trailers, hauled incredibly long distances, and deprived of food, water, and rest. USDA records from when horse slaughter took place



Klaus Hoese

domestically revealed horrific injuries that occurred during transport, including broken limbs, gaping wounds, and severe eye injuries.² Upon arrival at slaughterhouses, tired and panicked horses are forcefully pushed into the kill box. Subjected to overcrowding, deafening sounds, and the smell of blood, they become increasingly desperate, exhibiting "flight" behavior indicative of fear—pacing in prance-like movements with their ears pinned back against their heads and eyes wide open. Footage from a 2022 investigation by Animal Equity at one Mexican slaughterhouse showed underweight and sick horses being beaten, workers using electric shocks to prod animals, and ineffectively stunned horses that remained conscious prior to slaughter.³ Slaughter is a far cry from humane euthanasia and is not a compassionate end of life for horses.



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FOOD SAFETY ISSUES

American horses are not raised for food and are routinely treated with a variety of chemicals prohibited by the US Food and Drug Administration for use in animals slaughtered for human consumption. Almost universally, in fact, horse owners give their horses medications, antibiotics, ointments, wormers, and other substances labeled “not for animals intended for human consumption” and which, in some cases, linger in the body for long periods. Most horse owners do not expect their horses to end up slaughtered for human consumption, and horses are not regulated in the United States as livestock intended for human consumption. When horses are sold, especially through an auction, there is no required transfer of information regarding the substances they received during their lifetime. A study published in the journal *Food and Chemical Toxicology* examined records of racehorses bound for slaughter and found that all of them had recently been administered a substance that can have serious (even lethal) adverse effects in humans.⁴

THE “UNWANTED HORSE” MYTH

In recent years, horse slaughter proponents have consistently fought adoption of the SAFE Act, claiming that there is a huge “unwanted horse” population in the United States. In truth, no data exists to back up claims about a burgeoning population of “unwanted horses.” What is clear is that kill buyers working for the slaughterhouses are outbidding other buyers—including rescue groups—at auction because they have the financial incentive to do so. The market for slaughtered horses is set purely by foreign slaughterhouses and demand for their meat abroad, not by the number of supposedly unwanted horses in the United States. There has not been a corresponding increase in horse neglect and abuse cases since the last US horse slaughter plants closed in 2007.

Meanwhile, the number of equine rescues and sanctuaries around the country has grown. A 2019 Equine Welfare Data Collective survey counted 977 organizations in the United States that take in equines, with a total daily capacity of over 47,000 animals. (A 2023 survey counted 1,296 such organizations.) Over 500 of these rescues and sanctuaries are members of the Homes for Horses Coalition, a national network focused on ending equine abuse and passing a federal ban on horse slaughter due to its severe impacts on equine welfare. Although equine rescues and sanctuaries shouldn't

have to shoulder the entire burden, it is encouraging that there has been a rise in such facilities around the country, with many maintaining close ties with their surrounding communities in order to better assist with at-risk horses. Not every horse currently going to slaughter will need to be absorbed into the rescue community. → Humane placement options are available for these horses, such as selling to a vetted private owner, leasing to another horse enthusiast, and donating to an equine therapy program or mounted police unit. Gelding clinics are helpful in curbing backyard breeding and overbreeding, as well as encouraging responsible breeding practices. For sick and elderly horses, euthanasia by a licensed veterinarian is a far better option than the trauma of slaughter.

A CRUEL SYSTEM

The slaughter industry is a cruel system that takes advantage of horses and people. Predatory kill buyers obtain horses not only at auctions but also directly from unsuspecting owners. Increasingly, kill buyers use social media to take advantage of sympathetic individuals and equine rescues, threatening to send horses to slaughter unless they are “bailed out” for large sums. This system, which can financially cripple equine rescues while enabling kill buyers to further profit, is only feasible because exporting horses to slaughter is legal.

THE SOLUTION

The SAFE Act would end both the shipment of American horses for slaughter and end the threat that horse slaughter plants could reopen in the United States. This bill would finally align policy with the perspective of the public that our horses should not be butchered for meat.

For additional information, please contact Joanna Grossman at joanna@awionline.org.

1. Lake Research Partners (2022), available at <https://www.asPCA.org/news/new-poll-confirms-overwhelming-majority-americans-oppose-horse-slaughter>
2. See, for example, records obtained from the US Department of Agriculture. 2005, FOIA Request #06-108
3. Animal Equality, Investigation: U.S. Horses Awaiting Slaughter in Mexico (2024), available at <https://animalequality.org/news/investigation-us-horses-awaiting-slaughter-in-mexico/>.
4. Nicholas Dodman, Nicolas Blondeau & Ann M. Marini, Association of Phenylbutazone Usage with Horses Bought for Slaughter: A Public Health Risk, 48 *Food & Chem. Toxicol.* 1270 (2010), available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fct.2010.02.021>.