

Emerging data a growing dilemma for horse slaughter proponents

By: John Holland

No one could have predicted the way things would turn out. Starting in the late summer of 2007, the news for American horse owners was increasingly bleak. The summer had begun with a record breaking drought throughout the entire Southeastern US. Grain prices were up as much as thirty percent because of Ethanol demand, the economy was slipping, and the sub-prime meltdown threatened many home and farm owners.

In the midst of this perfect storm the last horse slaughterhouse in the country, Cavel in Dekalb Illinois, was shut down by a new state law in September, constricting what some saw as the only outlet for “unwanted” horses.

Two days later the looming crisis became personal for my wife and me. When our regular hay supplier made his September delivery, he announced that it was the last hay he could sell us! As we struggled to find a way to feed our eleven equines, I knew that hundreds of thousands of horse owners across the country would be facing the same dire situation.

Slaughter proponents, searching for a way to derail impending federal legislation against horse slaughter (HR.503 and S.311), found this looming crisis a perfect environment for denouncing the closing of US horse slaughter plants. This of course conveniently ignored the fact that the export of horses to slaughter had increased so dramatically that the number of horses slaughtered had dropped only 14% from 2006.

Soon stories began appearing around the country with headlines that blared out their messages of doom. The first story, written by an AP college basketball stringer, had appeared immediately after the closings of the Texas plants and claimed Kentucky was swamped with abandoned horses. It was soon exposed as baseless, but in the fall, the stories began to come in a torrent.

A story in the Oregonian bore the headline “Abandoned horses a growing dilemma for ranchers”. Another story in Ohio claimed that horses were being turned loose in state parks, and soon one story was sighting another as proof of the disaster that had befallen the horse world. Like rain on a tin barn roof, the hits from my programmed Google alert on “horse slaughter” quickly escalated from a sputter into a roar.

Soon even the largest papers were covering the supposed crisis with their own spins. January 10th, the Wall Street Journal’s Paulo Prada recounted a story of 19 Arab horses found starving on a Florida farm. The article said that these cases were mushrooming because of the drought, the economy and the closing of the slaughter plants.

But as it would turn out, the real story was not to be found in the press but on the internet. The number of horse chat groups and blogs has grown dramatically in recent years. Soon these horse groups were filling with messages.

There were frantic calls for help, but almost as many offers of assistance and suggestions. Some people offered their horses free just to be sure they did not go to auction and slaughter and others took them in.

Some rescuers performed amazing feats. One man in California traveled from farm to farm to supply small emergency rations of hay to those owners who were struggling desperately to hold on to their horses.

Horse nutrition specialists posted information on supplements and replacements for hay, while others shared information on hay prices, sources and haulers. Rescues that were not affected offered assistance to those who were, and hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised by groups like “Fans of Barbaro” to help rescue horses.

Meanwhile papers continued to crank out the stories of disaster and doom with sensational headlines. They largely follow a common pattern, starting with a graphic tale of abandonment, and then blaming the drought, the economy and of course the closing of the slaughter plants.

The first thing that seemed strange was the sheer volume of these stories. After all, Texas had suffered an even worse drought two years earlier (before the slaughter plants were closed) and there had been few stories about the stress on horse owners and none claiming horses were being abandoned.

In general, the stories lacked any statistical evidence for their claims of an abandoned horse apocalypse, but a few quoted the American Horse Council (AHC) as having estimated that between 120,000 and 320,000 horses were in the process of being abandoned.

When contacted about these estimates, the AHC communications director, Sara Chase, stated that they had never made any estimate of abandoned horses and that they had no statistics. She said the same was true for their Unwanted Horse Coalition.

The reason for the lack of such statistics is simple. There is no such category as “abandoned horses” in government terms. As Ed Hermes, information officer for the Arizona Department of Agriculture explained, “We don’t call them abandoned horses because there is no way to know if a stray horse was abandoned or just escaped.”

So authorities call loose horses “estrays”. The term “abandoned” appears to have been coined to assign willful intent for which there is no evidence. Like the cookie cutter

nature of the stories, and their lack of statistical proof, the very fact that so many articles used this term hints that most of these stories shared a common source.

Still, if the number of estray horse reports had increased dramatically, one might reasonably suspect an increase in abandonment. Since there are no national statistics on estray horses and since abandonment is illegal in every state, a few dedicated researchers like Terry Torrence, Julie Caramante and Valerie James-Patton began contacting almost every state and federal agency involved with public land and asked them about estray horses on their parks and lands. There were almost none.

More suspiciously, crosschecking of many stories showed them to be based on false information. For example, the Oregonian story about abandoned horses posing a growing dilemma for ranchers described nine horses found “abandoned” on rancher Wannie McKenzie's property.

But the Sheriff's report sited McKenzie's granddaughter as seeing only one horse, no horses were sighted by the investigating officer, and the case was marked 'unfounded'. Presented with this evidence, the Oregonian steadfastly refused to retract the story. Apparently, a single stray (or imaginary) horse is good enough to pose a “growing dilemma”.

Likewise, the story about horses being abandoned in Ohio parks was denied by park officials. Many stories were not even internally consistent. For example, the Wall Street Journal story, written in January of 2008, sited horses found starving on a Florida farm in May of 2007 as evidence of the effects of the drought and the closing of the slaughter plants. But the drought did not begin to become a factor until late summer, and the Cavell plant slaughtered over a thousand horses a week until September 20th.

Another story centered on an estray horse found a full year before the first plant closed and yet still implied it was related to the closings. Apparently, in the unfettered logic of horse slaughter proponents, cause and effect are no longer required to occur in that order as long as the headline is sensational enough.

Only one story produced real statistics. In an article carried in the Tucson Citizen and other papers, Jeremy Thomas of Cronkite News Service quoted Ed Hermes as saying “the agency seized 528 horses on public and private land in 2007, up from 454 the year before.”

To his credit, Thomas did not attempt to assign this increase to a lack of slaughter but rather, as Hermes suggested, to feed costs. But the release ran under “Abandoned Horses” and slaughter proponents recognized pure gold when they saw it. They immediately began using the statistics to bolster their argument of the evils of slaughter abstinence.

But alas, a check of this story revealed that it was fools gold. The quoted numbers were the number of *reports* of stray horses not the number of seized horses much less the number of abandoned horses. According to Hermes, in about 80% of such cases, the owner is quickly located and the horse returned. The remaining 20% are impounded.

Using this ratio, for 2007 the increase would have been just 15 impounded horses across the entire state, only 7 horses more than the three year average. Even by pro-slaughter calculus this would hardly justify returning to the slaughter of 100,000 horses a year.

But the award for *Best Hyperbole in Support of Horse Slaughter* goes to a January 15th press release from the Animal Agriculture Alliance. It declared "Tsunami of Horse Abuse Cases Sweeps Nation" and "Eliminating Horse Processing Devolves into Undeniable National Horror." As proof, the release sited all the other stories.

Clearly there was an agenda in many of these stories that forced their writers to cobble together inaccurate and inconsistent facts. If any of us had a doubt about that agenda, we found out on December 7th when Senator Larry Craig stood on the Senate floor and sited the stories as the reason he was denying his consent to proceeding on the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act! But it gets worse.

Last year Craig, a stalwart crusader against gay rights, was caught soliciting sex from an undercover officer in a Minneapolis Airport men's room. On February 15th, he was admonished by the Senate Ethics Committee for using \$213,000 of his campaign funds to pay his personal legal fees to fight these charges. And by pure coincidence, the American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA), the lead organization in the fight against anti-slaughter legislation, provided \$9,000 of this money!

Back on the personal front, our hay situation had stabilized. We had built a hay barn so we could buy hay by the truckload and through internet friends; we had found a source of good hay. Our cost was up from \$3.25 per bale to \$5.00 (low compared to the \$10 price Texas hay had reached a year before) but seeing that huge pile of sweet hay was a palatable relief.

By January, speculators were beginning to sell their hay and the whole crisis began to abate. It had not been easy, but it was clear our farm would get through. Still, I wondered about other owners and their horses. How bad had it really been for them?

My question would soon be answered by yet another analyst who painstakingly searched the tracking site PetAbuse.com and cataloged all of the cases of horse abuse or neglect that occurred between the beginning of 2007 and January 20th of 2008. She sorted the cases according to whether they occurred before or after September 20th of 2007 (the date when Cavel stopped slaughtering horses and roughly when the hay shortage began).

The results surprised everyone. The number of cases had not gone up at all but actually fallen dramatically! From an average of 12 cases involving 107.6 equines per month before September 20th, the number had dropped to an average of 7 cases involving 79.5 equines per month afterward. That we as horse owners had defied the odds, the media pundits and the slaughter proponents and come together to get through the storm was nothing short of a miracle.

It is now apparent that the “tsunami of horse abuse” was in reality an ebb tide. And in its wake, this ebb tide exposed the detritus of false and exaggerated stories leaving the pungent aroma of decaying propaganda and sloppy copycat journalism.

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