

The Plight of the Unwanted Horse: Scope of the Problem

Nat T. Messer, IV, DVM

For the past 10 yr or so, 1–2% of the domestic equine population is sent to slaughter and assumed to be unwanted. To their credit, equine welfare advocates attempt to identify suitable placement for these horse in the private and public sector; however, there simply are not enough volunteers, funding, or placement opportunities for all of the unwanted horses. There is not enough information dealing with why so many horses are unwanted and what can reduce their numbers. Author's address: College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Missouri, 379 East Campus Drive, Columbia, MO 65211. © 2004 AAEP.

On average, ~1–2% (75,000–150,000 horses) of the domestic equine population in the United States was sent to slaughter each year for the past 10 yr.¹ Another 10,000–20,000 horses were exported to Canada each year for slaughter, and an unknown number of horses were sent to Mexico for the same purpose. In 1998, >1% of the domestic equine population was sent to slaughter (~72,000 horses). In comparison, according to the 1998 National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) report, 1.3% of horses aged 6 mo–20 yr (~80,500 horses) on all premises surveyed either died or were euthanized in 1997. Additionally, 11.1% of horses >20 yr (~55,000 horses) on all premises surveyed either died or were euthanized in 1997.² Assuming these numbers are at least somewhat representative of what occurs annually, nearly 100 horses either die or are euthanized for every 50 horses that go to slaughter. Almost 200,000 equine carcasses must be disposed of annually, one-third of which are being processed for human consumption with the remainder being cremated, buried, “digested,” disposed of in landfills, or rendered.

Unwanted horses represent a subset 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 care for them either physically or financially. Most unwanted horses will likely be sent to slaughter with fewer numbers being euthanized and disposed of through rendering. Still fewer are simply abandoned and left to die of natural causes. Unwanted horses range from being essentially normal, healthy horses of varying ages and breeds to horses with some type of disability or infirmity, horses that are unattractive, horses that fail to meet their owner's expectations for their intended use (e.g., athletic ability), horses with non-life-threatening diseases, horses that have behavioral problems, or horses that are truly mean or dangerous. In many cases, these horses have had multiple owners, have been shipped from one sale barn, stable, or farm to another, and have ultimately been rejected as eligible for any sort of responsible, long-term care.

Along with the number of unwanted horses, there are also ~10,000 feral horses deemed to be unadopt-

NOTES

able or unwanted that are being maintained by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on privately owned sanctuaries. Additionally, 5000 or so horses are awaiting adoption in short-term holding facilities operated by the BLM, and ~20,000 pregnant mares and their foals from the pregnant mare urine (PMU) industry are displaced. One can readily see that the number of truly and/or potentially unwanted horses constitutes a significant number of horses to be dealt with each year and in the future.

To their credit, various equine welfare organizations, breed-specific organizations, benevolent equine welfare advocates, and horse owners have made a conscientious and concerted effort to provide care for unwanted horses, provide funding for the care of unwanted horses, or find suitable accommodations for them in both the private and public sector. These efforts coupled with widespread efforts to inform the public about the plight of the unwanted horse and a relatively high demand for horses by prospective buyers probably accounts for the decrease in horses sent to slaughter over the past 5–10 yr. The carrying capacity for these retirement farms, rescue farms, and sanctuaries as they are called is unknown at this point, but despite their noble efforts to provide care for many unwanted horses, the number of unwanted horses far exceeds the resources currently available. Even well-meaning volunteers can become overburdened with unwanted horses, which can be to the detriment of the horses under their care. There simply are not enough volunteers, funding, or placement opportunities for all of the unwanted horses.

Why are there so many apparently unwanted horses? Is there, as some would suggest, a glut of horses in the United States today? Was there, then, an even larger glut of horses when 200,000–300,000 horses were being sent to slaughter in the early 1990s? The horse industry depends, to a large extent, on the buying and selling of horses. It also depends on being profitable. Without demand from buyers and supply from sellers, the horse industry would not exist. When the monetary value of horses cannot be established or has no bottom limit, horses with minimal value will more likely be neglected. For the past 5–10 yr, the demand for horses on the part of those buying horses has been very good. Over the years, however, this demand has certainly run in cycles that frequently follow other economic trends. In general, when the demand for horses is low, then the number of unwanted horses increases, regardless of what their bloodlines may be. Recent changes in various breed organizations' rules, such as permitting the use of embryo transfer and frozen semen, have favored the production of horses, allowing breeders to produce more than one offspring per year from mares and allowing breeders to more efficiently select for horses with desirable bloodlines or performance records. New technology will further

facilitate this practice in the future. Unfortunately, even with the help of technological advances, not every mating will produce a horse that meets the expectations of a buyer. For those in the business of breeding and raising horses, an unsold horse becomes a liability rather than an asset.

Currently, to the author's knowledge, there is a lack of information about the demographics of unwanted horses other than the generalizations made previously (i.e., not marketable, disabled or infirm, unattractive, lacking athletic ability, dangerous, or mean). A more detailed study investigating the demographics of horses deemed to be unwanted would allow the horse industry to focus more appropriately on the problem. For example, former racehorses are frequently singled out as examples of unwanted horses when their racing careers end and they are not candidates for breeding or other athletic endeavors. There are undocumented estimates suggesting that <10% of the horses that go to slaughter are Thoroughbreds, but just how many of the 50,000–70,000 horses that went to slaughter last year in the U. S. and Canada were former racehorses? What is the average age and sex of those unwanted horses? What are the types of things that cause them to be unwanted? Are they purebred or grade horses? Answers to questions such as these and many more need to be addressed to understand the problem and potentially reduce the number of unwanted horses.

Whenever there are large numbers of unwanted horses, there is always concern for the welfare of these horses. According to Rebecca M. Gimenez, a member of the advisory board of the South Carolina Awareness and Rescue for Equines organization, "we have seen a huge upsurge in abuse and neglect cases over the last three years in our state alone."³ She goes on to say that "looking on the web and talking to veterinarians, farriers, and horse industry professionals all tell me that this isn't only a South Carolina problem."³ Neglect of horses takes many forms and is caused by a variety of factors. Could this upsurge in neglect, referred to by Dr. Gimenez, be solely the result of an increasing number of uninformed horse owners unfamiliar with the proper care of horses, could it be purely caused by economic constraints created by the downturn in the economy since 9/11, or could it be the result of the lack of affordable ways to responsibly dispose of unwanted horses brought about by regulations prohibiting burial of animal carcasses in some locales, costs associated with veterinary euthanasia and disposal by cremation, "digestion," or rendering, and fewer slaughter plants processing horses for human consumption? All of these factors must be considered when faced with such a large number of unwanted horses. A solution is needed to ensure that these horses are treated humanely and with dignity until the end of their lives.

References

1. National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), Agricultural Statistics Board, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1998 Report. www.usda.gov
2. National Animal Health Monitoring System Equine '98 Study. Part 1: Baseline Reference of 1998 Equine Health and Management, United States Department of Agriculture/Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. September 1999. N280.898 www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ceah/cnahs/nahms/equine/Equine98/eq98pt1.pdf
3. Gimenez RM. Letter to the editor re: unwanted horses. *The Horse Magazine* 2004; 21(April):30.