

What, exactly, is a Horse?

By Larry Hyslop



A dish of horse meat, photo from horsefund.org

We Americans cannot seem to agree on something as basic as the definition of a horse. You hear several definitions used by various individuals and groups. One, of course, is that a horse is a type of livestock. They are raised for a specific type of work, even if that work is to provide enjoyment to the owner. When the horse is no longer wanted or useful, it is sold to a slaughterhouse, end of story. Another, similar definition is a horse is a source of meat protein. People enjoy eating horse meat, although these connoisseurs are more often found in Europe and Japan.

In stark contrast to these definitions is the view that a horse as a companion animal, if not a specific pet. When such a horse is no longer wanted, it is euthanized by a veterinarian and given a proper burial, or at least taken to the city dump. Such a horse would no more be sent to a slaughterhouse than the family's dog or cat. Lastly, there are the people who view a horse as the romantic, iconic symbol of the American west, a living representation of American freedom. Such horses must be treated with the same dignity as other national symbols.

The Valley Meat Company outside of Roswell, New Mexico, has been working for over a year to convert their cattle processing plant to a horse slaughterhouse. Theirs would be the first such slaughterhouse to open in the last six years. The company accuses the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) of dragging their feet providing clearances, even though the slaughterhouse passed its inspection in April. The USDA says the procedure is needs one more signature, as long as the U.S. Congress does not ban such slaughterhouses before this one can open.

The United States has not had a horse slaughterhouse since September, 2007, when the last one closed its doors. At that time, Congress did not directly say horses should not be slaughtered. They banned the USDA from paying for inspectors of horse meat. Since all processed meat must be inspected, no horse meat could be sold and the last three slaughterhouses were forced to close.

Some states have also banned outright the slaughter of horses for human consumption. Not that people in those states would be consuming such meat, they just find the thought of foreigners eating American horse meat repugnant.

In 2011, congressional action restored the right for USDA to pay for inspections of horse slaughter, but did not provide the needed funding for such inspections. Once a horse slaughterhouse opens, the USDA will need to find funding in their already depleted budget. The meat from such a slaughterhouse would be shipped overseas for human consumption and sold as animal food in zoos.

Animal activist groups want to ban all domestic slaughter, along with the transport of horses to Mexico and Canada for slaughter. They feel a responsible horse owner who can no longer afford to care for and feed their horse, should pay several hundred dollars for its humane euthanization and burial.

The USDA says, as long as it is still legal, they will inspect any horse slaughterhouse that opens in the U.S. Investors in other states are interested in opening their own slaughterhouses, including at least three Indian tribal organizations. The Humane Society promises controversy, litigation, legislation and a very inhospitable working environment for any slaughterhouse that dares to open. The games go on.

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