

At Issue



RESULTS OF THE TRANSPORTATION BILL

By Betsy Sikora Siino



LARSH BRISTOL

They say that into every life a little rain must fall, but it would seem that the equine species has sustained more than its fair share of that proverbial precipitation. The most recent storm to level its wrath upon the horse is the political jockeying that marked the fate of proposed federal legislation that many hoped would revolutionize the treatment of horses being transported to slaughter.

What was originally sought by those seeking protection of these ill-fated horses was a detailed federal law that would, in a nutshell, outlaw the use of double-deck cattle trucks for the transport of horses (such vehicles are simply not designed for the stature and structure of a horse); require that the animals be fed, watered and rested every 10 to 12 hours en route (horses being transported typically travel up to 34 hours without rest or water); and mandate veterinary checks to determine whether horses are fit to travel (no more stuffing cattle trucks with horses suffering from broken bones, blindness, open wounds, et cetera).

After months of political wrangling on Capitol Hill and several incarnations of the proposed law, in March, what was originally a law for the "safe" and "humane" transport of horses bound for slaughter was tacked on to the congressional Farm Bill in

a substantially shortened form. The resulting legislation gives the USDA authority to "create guidelines" for the commercial transportation of horses to slaughter. "It doesn't say 'regulate,'" says Cathleen Doyle of the California Equine Council. "It just says 'create guidelines.' Through this metamorphosis they dropped 'safe' and 'humane,' and safe and humane transport became merely 'commercial transport.'"

Before this occurred, says Doyle, "you had an unregulated, legally suspect, highly controversial industry under great scrutiny of the public that is now being protected by the USDA and interstate commerce laws. This means the horse slaughter industry now functions unimpeded and with impunity under the USDA. What did the horses get? They didn't even get rubber mats. They got nothing."

Doyle and others have also been critical of the support for this new development received from the Humane Society of the United States, whose representatives were intimately involved with the drafting of the original legislation and ultimately agreed to what resulted. Had the organization walked away from the table, the bill would have died, and the 20-year battle would have been back to square one. This is why, explains Trina Bellak, director of federal

legislation for the HSUS, the organization chose to go forward.

"We thought that chances of getting anything better passed any time in the near future were slim," says Bellak. "We had built so much public support to get something done, it just seemed irresponsible to walk away from the process...As disturbing as it was to give up on all the detail that I personally worked on for three full years, the alternative was worse. We made the decision to get this law finally on the books in whatever vague and brief form it was taking, and press hard for full detailed comprehensive regulations, which are the only things that are actually going to make a difference anyway."

Needless to say, the anger and confusion wrought by political games that overlook equine suffering, and the suspicion that inevitably accompanies animal-welfare issues in which the USDA is involved, have not been eased by these events. But for the sake of the horses, the energy of that anger, confusion and suspicion is now best directed toward the situation at hand.

Immediately following the events in Washington, the HSUS met with the USDA and laid out in detail their proposed regulations. These include, among many others, the phasing out of double-deck cattle trucks, the implementation of two-hour feed and water stops every 10 hours, the requirement for veterinary checks to determine a horse's fitness for travel and the presence of USDA veterinarians at the plants to ensure compliance. "Things are not any better, and they won't be any better until these regulations are put into place," says Bellak. "We're going to push USDA as hard as we can to come up with the best regulations in the shortest time frame possible."

The HSUS is also calling for full funding for the development, implementation and enforcement of the regulations—

which, as Cathleen Doyle points out, was ignored in the original negotiations. Without funding, the regulations have no teeth. The HSUS is also turning to individual states to assist in the development of stringent, detailed state laws that are consistent with, but tougher and more detailed than, the federal regulations.

Once again, the horses must wait, continuing to suffer. Only time will tell if the safe and humane transport of horses bound for slaughter will ever become a reality in an atmosphere where politically powerful non-equine livestock interests fear that humane treatment of horses will ultimately dictate the humane treatment of other species, too. It's a world where politicians are willing to ignore the suffering of this animal for their own gains; where the horse industry itself fears that any acknowledgement of abuses in the slaughter industry will result in the abolition of this convenient dumping ground for extraneous animals; and where covert sentiments hold that "Oh well, they're going to die anyway. Why should we care how they're treated during their final hours?"

But we are honorbound to care. As long as we choose to call on horses as we have for hundreds of years for their muscle and their companionship, we must ensure that they receive the protection they have earned in our service since the dawn of our partnership—even in those final hours.

So far, we have failed miserably in this mission. Since the March decision, Cathleen Doyle has attended several California auctions, only to find business as usual. "I go to the auctions and they're loading the horses up on the double-deck cattle trucks. They're going to go 32 hours straight through—no food, water or rest—and nobody's vet-checking them. Absolutely nothing was accomplished, no protection for the horses, and now [the industry] is protected under the USDA."

In light of the reality of the situation, the public is now being called upon to write to the secretary of agriculture, urging his support for the adoption of the detailed regulations. Also critical are letters to our elected officials in the Senate and the House, reminding them that many Americans view the horse slaughter industry as abhorrent, and asking them to seek full funding for the development and enforcement of regulations that will end transportation cruelties.

In the meantime, the horses wait. And the rain continues to fall. 🐾

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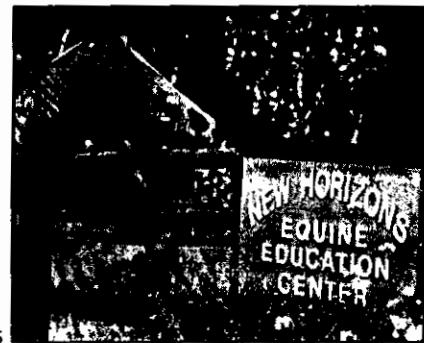
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