

A Hot-Button Issue

AQHA explains its position on slaughter.

By the AQHA Executive Committee:

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ON PAGE 32, YOU'LL READ ABOUT HORSE OWNERS who faced difficult decisions for their beloved horses. At AQHA, countless members and even employees are horse owners who dote on their "kids," spending copious amounts of money and time with them – and dreading the day when they, too, will face difficult end-of-life decisions.

But we realize that not all horses, and not all horse owners, are in similar circumstances. Sometimes horses become dangerous, or their owners – for a variety of reasons – become unable or unwilling to care for them.

Sending a horse to a processing facility is unthinkable to many. And we respect that view. But for others, it is the best option. AQHA recognizes that the processing of unwanted horses is currently a necessary aspect of the equine industry, because it provides a humane euthanasia alternative for horses that might otherwise continue a life of discomfort and pain, or inadequate care or abandonment.

For years, AQHA has opposed legislation that would – in any way – ban the processing of horses. At the same time, AQHA has actively supported legislation to ensure the safe and humane transportation of horses that are bound for one of the United States' three federally inspected processing facilities and backed guidelines for how horses must be treated at the facilities. On the surface, AQHA's position might appear to be pro-slaughter, but it's not that cut and dried.

AQHA supports other choices for unwanted horses, including euthanasia by injection, life in an equine retirement facility, donation to a college or university, or simply being turned out to pasture. The Association encourages responsible ownership practices and management that will reduce the number of unwanted horses. A booklet entitled "Understanding Your Options for the Unwanted Horse" is available on AQHA's Web site, www.aqha.com/association/who/unwantedhorses.html.

While AQHA does not favor processing as a way of dealing with unwanted horses or an owner's equine end-of-life decision, the Association does recognize that both

leading U.S. veterinary groups (the American Association of Equine Practitioners and the American Veterinary Medical Association) have stated that the penetrating captive bolt used in processing plants is *the most* humane method of euthanasia. Nearly 100,000 horses are sent to processing plants each year, to be used as food for zoos and human consumption outside the United States.

We should also say that issues concerning human consumption of horse meat are outside the scope of AQHA; therefore the Association takes no official position on the subject except to say that it is a personal, cultural and social issue.

One of the major issues in the slaughter debate centers around personal property rights. AQHA believes that allowing animal-rights advocates to determine how we manage our horses opens the door to letting them put other limits on what we can or cannot do with our horses (i.e. transportation, trail riding, racing, showing and overall care). AQHA respects the right of horse owners to manage their personal property as they choose, so long as the welfare of the American Quarter Horse is paramount to all other concerns.

Economics also comes into play. Other options for dealing with unwanted horses can be costly, and the last thing anyone would want to risk is having a horse neglected or abused because an owner might not have all the options available to him or her.

Each year in this country, between 4 and 6 million dogs and cats are euthanized at animal shelters. These shelters benefit from widespread public support and are funded by taxpayer dollars. If processing were not an option for unwanted horses, imagine finding homes for 100,000 horses each year or building an equine welfare system supported by taxpayers.

These arguments are not considered by organizations such as the National Horse Protection Coalition, which actively lobbies Congress to pass legislation that would eliminate horse processing in the

United States. The NHPC uses emotion in its arguments, and, as horse lovers ourselves, we at AQHA realize that the issue of sending a horse to a processing facility is emotional. But we also know that logic has to win out over emotion.

The group that opposes AQHA's position offers no alternatives in its bill. Additionally, there are no oversight provisions for equine rescue and retirement facilities in the bill. Nor are there any programs proposed for the education of horse owners or population-control measures such as spay and castration assistance. It is AQHA's fear that through this legislation, bottom-end, unemployable and unwanted animals may suffer increases in neglect and place an undue burden on state and local governments.

Proposing legislation of this sort is, at best, irresponsible and if passed can only harm horses, not help them. Addressing the more serious issue means finding suitable homes or affordable euthanasia options for unwanted horses.

Proponents of the slaughter ban also like to characterize AQHA as being greedy and not being for the benefit of the horse. That couldn't be further from the truth. As we've mentioned, our members are horse lovers, and so are our employees and members of our governing board. Horses are *the* reason for our existence.

Since 1960, AQHA and its benevolent arm, the American Quarter Horse Foundation, have donated nearly \$6 million for equine research that benefits all horses. And AQHA enforces rules that call for disciplining any member who does not treat his or her American Quarter Horses humanely. AQHA has always been for its horses, which is precisely why the Association opposes careless legislation that could adversely affect *any* horse.

In a 2004 poll of elected directors, a vast majority of them (89 percent) stated that processing should be an option for horse owners. These directors represent AQHA members – just as members of Congress do in the U.S. government. They are the link between members and their Association.

America's Horse and other AQHA publications have done stories that explain the Association's governance system, but it bears repeating because we want members to understand how they can make their voices heard.

AQHA directors are like U.S. senators or representatives. As American citizens, we don't have a direct vote in Congress, but we can contact our legislators and ask them to take our viewpoints into consideration. The same holds true at AQHA.

The names and addresses of all AQHA directors are printed once a year in *America's Horse*, in every issue of *The American*

UNDERSTANDING YOUR OPTIONS FOR THE UNWANTED OR UNUSABLE HORSE.



Nobody likes to think about it, much less talk about it. But it's one of those topics that must be addressed.

We're talking about the unwanted, unneeded or unusable horse.

Over time, some horses become unusable because they get sick, injured or old. Some might be unmanageable because they are dangerous or unruly. In some instances, an owner's financial situation might change and they can no longer afford to properly care for the horse. Whatever the reasons, many people face the difficult decision of dealing with an unwanted or unusable horse.

In a perfect world, it would be ideal for every horse to live out its days in rich, green pastures. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. That's why we've developed this manual to help you explore the many options that are available to all horse owners. Above all, we want to ensure that your horse's health and welfare are at all times paramount to every other consideration.

Quarter Horse Journal and in every other issue of *The American Quarter Horse Racing Journal*. The contact information is also available online at www.aqhamembers.org. (A box on the right-hand side of the page will help you log in if you haven't visited our Member Services area before.) Or, you can also call AQHA Customer Service at (806) 376-4811 for a list of directors in your state.

AQHA members do have a voice, can have input and can have their opinion counted by contacting their directors or the Association directly.

If you agree with AQHA's position, we'd appreciate it if you let us know and, more importantly, let your senators and congressmen in Washington, D.C., know. If you disagree, we want to hear from you, too, but please offer a constructive alternative, not just criticism.

And remember, AQHA *is* about the horse and about educating owners on options they have. It is not about sensationalizing a very emotional issue. ☐