

New Mexico State Legislature Water and Natural Resources Committee
Remarks by Myles Culbertson, Executive Director, New Mexico Livestock Board

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of this Committee, for the opportunity to discuss the ominous growing problem of unwanted, abandoned, and neglected horses in New Mexico and across the country.

In 2007 the United States Department of Agriculture withdrew inspection from all horse slaughter plants in the country, ultimately forcing their closure. This action was the result of active and relentless pressure from a number of animal rights organizations, including the Humane Society of the United States, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and others. Declaring victory in 2008, Wayne Pacelle, chief executive for the HSUS, boasted, "*...the shutdown of the horse slaughter plants in the United States last year, which The Humane Society of the United States helped to engineer, was a first step in our plans to ban all horse slaughter in North America, and certainly a first step toward a ban on slaughtering American horses here in the United States or in Canada or Mexico.*"

My colleagues on this panel will provide you a detailed quantitative look at the issue of unwanted and surplus horses, but for now I would like to briefly examine the truth of that so-called victory in terms of its ethics, humanity, and societal cost.

It is estimated that, each year, well over 100,000 horses in the United States become unwanted, no longer useful. If no means of disposal is available, this obviously becomes a compounding number. Since 2007, by this estimate, the number of horses rendered unwanted and in need of disposal throughout the United States will soon exceed half a million. At least partially absorbing this surplus, processing facilities in Mexico and Canada have increased their capacity; nevertheless, over the same period of time we have seen steadily increasing individual occurrences of abandoned, neglected, and starving horses, as well as excessive populations of horses placing extreme ecological stress on public and tribal lands. We have also seen, in the same period of time, the

value at auction for surplus horses fall from several hundred dollars to virtually nothing.

The economic downturn adds to the dilemma. Consider this scenario: An individual or family that owns one or two or a few horses is facing shortage of work and dwindling resources. It isn't long before the choices must be made between properly feeding the horses, or paying the bills, buying food for family, and all the rest. If taken to the auction, the costs exceed the proceeds. Euthanasia and disposal costs several hundred dollars, money they don't have. The horse shelters are at capacity. It comes down to under-nourishing the horse while hoping for the best and risking being charged with animal cruelty; or slipping out in the night and abandoning the horse on public land. There are indeed situations where neglect or malicious cruelty are committed, but it is my belief that the foregoing scenario characterizes many and possibly most, individual neglect cases.

Horse owners under financial duress are faced with few if any good options when - with the pressure of a bad economy, high costs of feed and maintenance, value lower than marketing costs, high cost of euthanasia & disposal - they must find a way out from under the responsibilities of ownership.

Besides the quandary facing many small horse owners, numbers of abandoned and feral horses continue to grow on various tracts of public land, their ultimate demise possibly accelerating by the degradation of forage and an ongoing drought.

The HSUS "victory" may have been a political one, but for thousands of horses, it holds scant hope against suffering and starvation. In their 62-page report to Congress, the United States Government Accounting Office states the following:

"Horse welfare in the United States has generally declined since 2007, as evidenced by a reported increase in horse abandonments and an increase in horse abuse and neglect. The extent of the decline is unknown due to a lack of comprehensive national data, but state officials attributed the decline in horse welfare to many factors, but primarily to the cessation of domestic slaughter and

the U.S. economic downturn. Abandoned, abused, and neglected horses present challenges for state and local governments, tribes, and animal welfare organizations."

Cessation of horse slaughter in the United States has brought significant suffering to thousands of unwanted horses, and significant problems to be addressed by agencies of government and legitimate animal welfare organizations, including strains on resources and budget. In addition, surplus horses are now subjected to more handling, longer hauling distances, limited regulatory oversight in transit, and no regulatory oversight in the processing facilities.

The foregoing might actually be considered to have been the best-case scenario if the full HSUS agenda is achieved. Closure of access to the Canadian and Mexican plants will flush well in excess of 100,000 horses each year, but not into the marketplace, because there will be no market. Huge numbers of unwanted horses will be starved, abandoned, or otherwise thrust upon society for disposition, with no viable or practical options. The financial and operational burden on animal welfare organizations and agencies will be extreme.

Mr. Chairman, New Mexico, as you and the Committee know, has a very long, rich, and proud agricultural and livestock history. Stewardship is not new and is not unfamiliar in our culture. The New Mexico Livestock Board, being an organization created in 1887 for protection of livestock in New Mexico, helps assure that stewardship. In our business - the livestock business - love of animals is ingrained, and is a moral imperative as well as an economic necessity. Those who do not treat their livestock with that necessary regard and care are the rare exception, and usually fail in their enterprise.

The opposite of *love* is not *hatred*; it is *indifference*. It is my firm belief that the animal rights organizations saw political and financial opportunity in their campaign to end horse slaughter in the United States. They used imagery and emotion to divert facts and truth, manipulating the compassion of many good, generous Americans. Once they achieved their objective, they turned their collective back with indifference to the tragic outcome of their agenda, sentencing thousands of horses to fates worse than what

would have awaited them in a humane, regulated processing facility. Now we, as an agency of the state, and a protector of the livestock industry, must bear part of the burden of dealing with these unintended consequences.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for your time and attention to these issues.