Legislation banning horse slaughter could actually endanger horse welfare

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Summary
Animal activists and some horse groups are pushing legislation through Congress that would ban processing horses for human consumption. The success of this legislation could set a precedent for increased government influence in animal management practices.

Background
Two bills introduced during the 108th Congress would ban the processing of horses for human consumption. The legislation was introduced under the premise of protecting horse welfare, but the provisions of these bills may harm horses rather than protect them. In addition, the proposed ban on the humane processing of horses is not based on food safety, public health, scientific facts or solid animal husbandry.

Each year, approximately 55,000 horses are processed in the United States for human consumption. Most of this meat is exported overseas with a small amount remaining to fulfill the demands of cultural groups in the United States. The majority of these animals are old, in poor health or unmanageable.

Horse transportation to processing facilities is regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), as mandated by the Commercial Transportation of Equine for Slaughter provision in the 1996 Farm Bill. At the processing plants, the horses are humanely euthanized according to requirements of the Humane Slaughter Act. USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) regulates horse processing.

Eliminating horse slaughter as a management option may actually pose a risk to horse welfare. This legislation restricts methods of humane euthanasia, which may mean horses are allowed to continue a life of discomfort or pain, inadequate care and/or abandonment. The legislation would also deny owners the option of recapturing a horse’s value at auction.

Opponents of the legislation argue that horse adoption and rescue facilities would be able to handle unwanted horses, but these facilities are already inundated with horses confiscated by the government or given up voluntarily. The additional numbers of homeless horses this legislation could create might further stress these facilities, making it even harder for them to adequately care for the many horses that need it.

Proponents of the legislation say that horse owners have a right to manage their animals and other livestock in a responsible and respectful way. Regardless of how people feel about the consumption of horse meat, slaughter is still a humane option for the management of horses.

Additionally, there’s concern among the animal agriculture industry that success of legislation like this could open the way for activist groups to force further change not based on science or sound animal husbandry practices.

Key Points
- Two bills introduced during the 108th Congress would ban the processing of horses for human consumption — an action activists and some horse groups are supporting.
- Horse slaughter is a humane management option for animals that are generally older or in poor health.
- The success of legislation such as this, which is not based on science or solid animal husbandry practices, could lead to activists pushing legislation that would affect cattle management and production methods.