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## SLAUGHTER vs. RESCUE

The rising costs of caring for horses run head-on into the debate over the ban on killing the animals in U.S. for meat

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A movement to ban killing horses for meat has contributed to the closing of the nation's last horse slaughterhouse and spawned efforts to ban sending horses to Canada or Mexico for slaughter.

But discoveries of malnourished horses have renewed questions that perhaps it's necessary to make slaughter available for horse owners. They could collect maybe a couple hundred dollars by selling an old horse for slaughter rather than continue to pay thousands a year for care and feeding -- a situation with which some horse advocates sympathize.

"I understand completely why they do that," said veterinarian Tom Lenz, of the American Association of Equine Practitioners, which opposes a slaughter ban. Horses unwanted by their owners -- estimated at more than 100,000 by the American Veterinary Medical Association -- often wind up at rescue and retirement facilities. Some existing rescue operations report more calls to pick up horses, and new sites, some at prisons, are planned.

Marcia Moss, the operator of a 4-year-old Bullitt County rescue farm and slaughter opponent, said she's never had so many people reporting starving horses or needing to get rid of them as she has in the past couple of months.

The calls recently have come about every other day. With room for five horses in addition to one of her own, Moss refers those she can't take to other rescue groups or finds homes.

The number of horses sent to Mexico for slaughter has totaled 14,000 so far this year, double the number during the same period a year ago, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Kentucky Department of Agriculture is seeing "a moderate uptick" in people having trouble finding feed or caring for their horses, although formal statistics aren't kept, spokesman Bill Clary said.

It was five years ago that reports surfaced that 1986 Kentucky Derby winner Ferdinand had been killed in a Japanese slaughterhouse. The stories motivated horse-rescue operations and shocked Americans who weren't aware that horses are routinely butchered for food in other countries.

### **Little Cliff saved from slaughterhouse**

Just a few weeks ago, Little Cliff, a one-time contender for the 2006 Derby, was rescued from being sent to slaughter.

"Let me tell you something, if they're not careful, you'll see another Ferdinand," said two-time Derby winning trainer Nick Zito, the original conditioner of Little Cliff.

About the only agreement among slaughter proponents and opponents is that the increased costs of fuel and food are issues for horse owners.

"It probably has a lot more to do with the drought than anything else," Clary said of the increase in reports of unwanted horses in Kentucky.

Last spring's freeze and the summer drought in Kentucky made hay scarce, and prices remain high. Moss said, for example, that she paid \$50 to \$75 for a large round bale of hay this winter compared to \$25 to \$30 the previous winter. Overall, the cost of caring for a horse for a year is estimated at \$1,800 to \$2,500 -- if the horse doesn't face any significant complications. And that estimate doesn't factor in increased costs in fuel used to transport feed and horses.

### **Owners in a jam over costs, ban**

Those increases have put some owners in a bind.

"I'd say where it used to be the horse owners would try a little harder ... now it's just get rid of them as quick as you can," Moss said.

As costs have risen, horse groups have split over how last year's elimination of domestic slaughter -- through state laws and court battles -- factors into the financial equation.

Horses are still slaughtered -- just elsewhere -- so it's not a factor in the current situation, contends Diana Pikulski, executive director of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation. "It seems to me it's no different than it's been for the past 25 years that we've been doing this."

Groups that believe slaughter is needed as an option, however, argue the closure of the American plants is contributing.

"There is not another option right now that's out there for people who need to use it," said Tom Persechino, senior marketing director for the American Quarter Horse Association. The increase in horse shipments to Mexico was predictable because of the American closures, he said.

"This isn't something that just will go away someday when the prices (of items such as hay) get better," Lenz said. "I don't buy that at all."

The other options are rescue facilities and euthanasia.

The Unwanted Horse Coalition, which Lenz leads, lists about 200 rescue sites in the United States and Canada that accept horses. Such sites are not required to be registered, however, so there could be more.

Whether the available locations are enough to handle the horse population is debated. Lenz said 6,000 to 10,000 horses a year can be rescued, but both he and Persechino said the rescue sites can't handle all the unwanted.

With thoroughbreds, the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation operates about 30 locations throughout the country, including three in Kentucky and one in Indiana. All told, the foundation's

shelters can handle about 1,200 horses with 500 more placed privately, Pikulski said.

One of those is the Maker's Mark Secretariat Center at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, where horses are trained for other careers.

### **Rescue centers offer a good alternative**

Pikulski's group is establishing rescue centers at prisons in Maryland and Pennsylvania as they have in Kentucky and Indiana. She also said the group is working with colleges to use retrained horses for their equine programs.

"There are enough prisons in the United States to find a home for every single horse coming off the racetrack," Pikulski said. "There are enough people who want to adopt a thoroughbred racehorse that's sound for riding to place every single sound horse that comes off the racetrack. There is a place for every horse, but the people who want to get rid of the horse have to be responsible."

Churchill Downs Inc. has a Greener Pastures Program in partnership with the retirement foundation that attempts to facilitate the donation of horses to the foundation from its tracks.

The 1-year-old, multi-breed Kentucky Equine Humane Center, which pledges never to turn away a horse in a precarious situation, helped more than 165 horses last year.

Staci Hancock, president and founder of the center, said its efforts give any horse owner an alternative to neglecting or sending a horse to slaughter.

The other option is euthanasia, which can cost \$200 or more -- plus disposal.

Lenz said he expects that euthanasia centers might be needed in the future. Disposal of a horse can be difficult because of environmental laws.

Ginny Grulke, executive director of the Kentucky Horse Council, said a council subcommittee is looking at some sort of statewide effort to geld stallions and provide euthanasia services.

The issue of unwanted horses needs study, the Kentucky Agriculture Department's Clary said, taking no position on shelters. "This is something that needs to be thought out seriously."

Reporter Gregory A. Hall can be reached at (502) 582-4087.



By Michael Clevenger, The Courier-Journal

*Suzanna Thomas works with horses at the Maker's Mark Secretariat Center at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington. It's just one of the sites that give horses a second chance at life. Still, more horses are being sent to Mexico for slaughter since it was banned in the United States.*

#### Photo Galleries

- [Rescuing horses vs. Slaughtering them](#)



By Michael Clevenger, The Courier-Journal

*Suzanna Thomas groomed a horse at the Secretariat Center. It is one of about 30 sites throughout the country operated by the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation.*

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