

Hey Neighbor

For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

Plant Closings Don't Stop Processing As Unwanted Horse Problem Continues

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Recent closings of processing plants in this country have virtually ended the availability of that option for dealing with the problem.

Red meat animal producers "can eat their way out of expansion," literally, as well as reduce breeding, to get volumes back in line. It's more complicated with horses.

There will always be unwanted horses because it is impossible to prevent horses aging, all injuries, or producing horses that are not attractive or athletic. Currently, no convenient procedure is available for handling them.

Headlines have brought the situation to the attention of more people.

That's a positive toward solving the problem, according to Dr. Tom Lenz, Overland Park, spokesman for the American Association of Equine Practitioners.

"Most people had never heard of unwanted horses three years ago, but they have now become aware of the problem," Lenz informed. "Moreover, there is activity across the horse industry to develop strategies for dealing with the surplus horse inventory."

Unwanted horses are for various reasons no longer desired by their owners. "They may be old, lame, dangerous, poor athletes or merely not meeting owner expectations," Lenz clarified.

"Traditionally, these horses were retired, rescued or sold. Some found new careers. However, over 90,000 annually ended up at

U.S. processing plants, and were shipped to Europe for human consumption," he stressed.

For several years, federal legislation has been introduced to make it illegal to process horses in the United States for human consumption.

"None of the bills have ever been approved," Lenz qualified. "However, state laws in Texas and Illinois closed plants in those states. Horse processing for all practical purposes has been stopped in the United States."

There are about 9.5 million horses in this country. "That's a lot of horses, but despite stopping U.S. slaughter, the number is probably relatively stable," according to Lenz.

That could mean that owners have slowed breeding, compared to just a couple of years ago. Yet, problems still exist, because there is no ready way to dispose of the excess.

Previously, owners took horses they did not need to sale barns and forgot about them. "Many of those did end up at slaughterhouses, but owners just put that out of their minds, and went about their way," the veterinarian evaluated.

Outlets for surplus horses are virtually nil in this country. Adoption agencies have been set up in some locales, but they soon find numbers economically troublesome, and set limitations or close down. Sometimes owners take responsibility and euthanize their horses, which is nei-

ther simple nor inexpensive.

Where are the horses going?

"Many horses are being exported to Mexico," Lenz said. "Over 45,000 head were shipped to Mexico last year."

Some of those went into breeding or using programs, but the export rate for slaughter horses shipped into Mexico expanded 311 percent.

"Additionally, about 35,000 horses were exported to Canada last year for processing," Lenz continued.

Those promoting an end to slaughter of horses in the United States are being bitten on their backside.

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those wanting to stop horse processing in this country have resulted in some very serious consequences that have worsened the predicament," Lenz evaluated.

Although certain groups, such as the Humane Society of the United States, have contended that the "unwanted horse" is a myth, livestock organizations like the American Veterinary Medical Association have tried to present the situation honestly.

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Lenz also explained that people often think their contributions to the Humane Society of the United States go to local Humane Society efforts. "That is definitely not the case," he contended. "Those donations are used for national lobbyist efforts, such as those to end horse slaughter."

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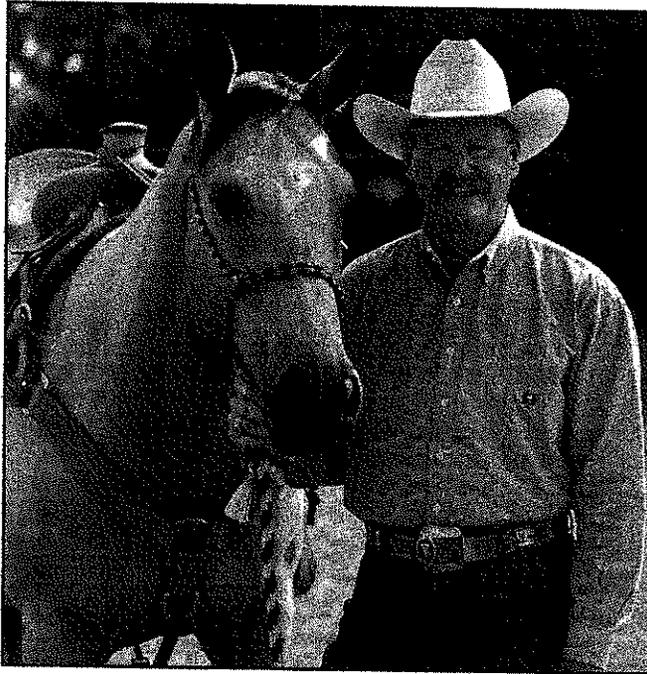
Dramatic increases in fuel and feed costs have required horse owners in the middle and lower income brackets to choose between caring for their families or their horses. "This emphasizes that we have an unwanted horse issue to address," Lenz continued.

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Responsible horse ownership is the key, Lenz declared. "If everyone who purchased or raised a horse accepted responsibility of caring for that horse throughout its entire life or finding another person to do so, there would be no unwanted horses."

If the owner can't find a home or career for their

horse, that same person should consider euthanizing it, rather than dropping it off at a sale barn or other location, and hoping another person will take accountability.

"This will require a shift in the way we view and handle unwanted horses, but it may be best for the future," Lenz analyzed.

Remedies are obviously long-term and complicated. "This is going to be a continuing situation," Lenz predicted.

He advised: "Talk to

other people about the issue and possible solutions. Consider buying a horse rather than raising one. Give some thought to end-of-life choices for horses.

"Own responsibly," Lenz concluded.

Wild horses, or mustangs, are not a major percentage of the nation's horse count, but government handling and taxpayer costs of those expanding numbers are notable. Next week's For The Love Of Horses will review that issue.

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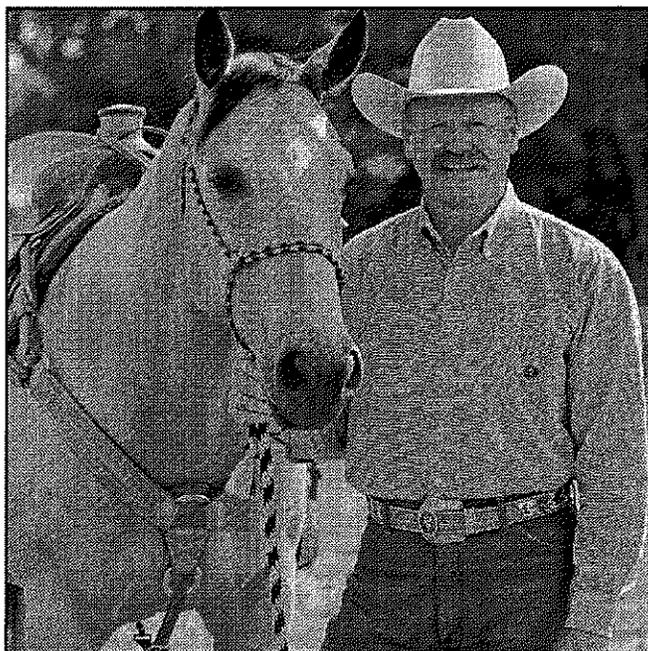
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