

Horse Slaughter Debate Draws Strong Opinions



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All across the West, the iconic images of horses galloping across the wind-swept rangelands carry a host of symbolic meanings for Native Americans. But that doesn't mean some tribes don't embrace horse slaughter as a responsible solution

to the thousands of horses overpopulating their rangeland, polluting their streams and running roughshod over their cultural practices. And now their voices are adding to the already controversial topic of whether or not horses should once again be slaughtered in the United States.

Yakima Nation Chairman Harry Smiskin recently wrote to President Obama and Secretary Vilsack about the need to resume horse slaughter in the United States. While noting that, "no other president has done more to include Indian tribes in his priorities," he expressed "serious disappointment" with recent statements coming from representatives of the Agriculture Department on the issue of horse slaughter and the processing of horse meat.

"To understand my concern, you must first know that the Yakama Reservation is literally overrun with what some call wild horses," or more accurately, "feral" horses. Smiskin estimated more than 12,000 feral horses currently inhabit his reservation, which covers about 1.2 million acres in Washington State.

"Through overgrazing, destruction of stream banks and the intimidation of species of native animals that we are trying to reintroduce...these feral horses are doing very serious environmental damage to our homeland," Smiskin wrote.

USDA is charged with approving and inspecting horse slaughter plants, but in his 2014 budget, President Obama included language to block USDA funds for inspecting horse slaughter plants, essentially keeping them shuttered. A similar ban was in place from 2005 to 2011.

"We don't understand why it is OK to slaughter many animals in this country – certainly the White House and the USDA have meat on their cafeteria menus every day – but for some reason horses are considered sacrosanct," Smiskin continued. "We should not manage these horses based on purely emotional arguments, story books or movies we saw as children. There is a market for horse meat in many parts of the world and if we can create jobs, humanely reduce overpopulated herds and feed others, it is absurd to prohibit it.

"Surely a well regulated processing plant is far more humane than what is happening to many feral horses now," he added. Absent U.S. approvals, about 138,000 horses are now being shipped to Canada and Mexico for slaughter, according to a GAO report.

Despite efforts to sterilize animals and spur adoptions, the adult horse population in Washington, Oregon and Idaho exceeds 20,000 and increases 20 percent annually because of new foals born, according to tribal sources. The horse population – up from 4,500 in 2006 – is

destroying much of their fragile environment and income opportunities.

"Feral horses – and unwanted domestic horses being dumped in the country due to the economic meltdown – are now destroying rangeland forage needed to feed livestock and wildlife and to retain soil in place. They are also eating special plants of spiritual and nutritional significance to the local tribes," notes the Northwest Tribal Horse Council in a report on their web site. While tribes have been working diligently to improve habitat for fishing staples like salmon and steelhead, horses are creating environmental degradation.

The Northwest Tribal Horse Council, which is composed of members of the Yakima and Colville tribes in Washington, the Umatilla and Warm Springs tribes in Oregon, and Shoshone Bannock in Idaho, have discussed the potential for a rendering plant or mobile slaughter facility that could move around the area, but thus far, they have not advanced any plans to do so, says Yakima Nation's counsel George Waters. For now, a primary concern is that the United States has fiduciary trust responsibility toward tribes that is not being implemented, Waters said.

"One could argue that, if these horses are doing such a significant amount of damage, [then] the United States is not properly carrying out its trust responsibilities," Waters said.

In 2012, Congress lifted the ban on USDA inspections, which prevented horse slaughter. But this highly emotional subject continues to draw strong opposition from lawmakers like Rep. Jim Moran, D-Va., the Humane Society of the U.S. and others. Last year, HSUS warned that USDA must comply with a 2007 ruling from the D.C. District Court that they say requires an environmental review of horse slaughter operations prior to resuming the inspection of facilities.

USDA now has a list of firms interested in resuming horse slaughter including Valley Meat of Roswell, N.M.; Rains Natural Meats of Galatin, Mo.; Trail South Meat Processing of Woodbury, Tenn.; Oklahoma Meat Co. of Washington, Okla.; and Responsible Transportation of Sigourney, Iowa.

But USDA has been slow to approve any applications – prompting Valley Meats to sue the department in federal court last fall. The Department of Justice asked for a 60-day extension to file its response to the lawsuit, which the court granted until April 29.

"While there are currently no establishments authorized to slaughter horses, several companies have requested that FSIS reestablish inspection," explained a USDA spokesperson. "These companies must still complete necessary technical requirements and FSIS must still complete its inspector training, but at that point, the Department will legally have no choice but to go forward with inspections, which is why we urge Congress to reinstate the ban." Δ

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