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Horse slaughter facility promoted

By **BRIAN DUGGAN**
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Despite federal pressure to ban horse slaughtering entirely, a House committee agreed with two state lawmakers on Friday that the state should set aside money to study the possibility of opening an equine processing plant in North Dakota.

Ranchers, veterinarians and horse breeders filled the Capitol's Brynhild Haugland room, where they told lawmakers on the House Agriculture Committee that processing unwanted horses for meat is a more humane and profitable alternative than abandoning or euthanizing them.

They were testifying in favor of a bill that would set aside up to \$75,000 in agriculture fuel tax revenue for a study to see if North Dakota could feasibly - and legally - open a horse slaughterhouse.

"The actions in Washington, D.C., have created a problem for horse owners," said Rep. Rod Froelich, D-Selfridge, who is co-sponsoring the legislation with Sen. Joe Miller, R-Park River.

If the bill passes, the funds will go to the state Department of Commerce to study the feasibility of the project, Froelich said, adding not all the money will be spent if it turns out that the laws are already too restrictive on horse slaughterhouses.

"We've got to lay the groundwork first," he said.

Froelich said the problem started when the U.S. Agriculture Department stopped funding federal meat inspectors two years ago to oversee the nation's three horse slaughterhouses.

The plants closed amid a growing chorus of political fervor to shut down the horse slaughterhouses, leaving horse owners with fewer options for unwanted horses. Congress also is considering a bill that would prohibit the consumption of horse meat.

As a result, Froelich said the market for unwanted horses has plummeted, sometimes costing horse owners more money to simply transport their animals to a ring compared to the amount of money they could expect to get in return for them.

Greg Kitto, a North Dakota veterinarian who treats horses, told the committee that he's seen an increase in requests for him to euthanize horses in recent years, which he said correlates to the closure of three horse processing plants in Illinois and Texas.

"I'm getting more and more calls to do it on unwanted horses and it's because they can't take them to slaughter," Kitto said, testifying in favor of the study. He

added it can cost horse owners hundreds of dollars to euthanize and then dispose of a horse.

While testifying, the veterinarian of 34 years held up a photo of an emaciated horse lying in a field. It had starved to death after its owner abandoned it a few weeks back. Kitto said that is what some horse owners have resorted to because they can no longer care for nor afford the animal, which can carry an annual price tag of about \$2,200.

"He was allowed to starve to death," Kitto said. "I'm not saying the guy didn't do wrong and he's going to be prosecuted. If he had an alternative, maybe something else could have been done."

But opponents to the bill say breeders need to be more cautious and that euthanasia is more humane than sending a horse to die on the floor of a slaughterhouse.

"Why on Earth would anyone have to watch their horse suffer and die?" said Alison Smith, co-owner of the Triple H Horse Rescue in Mandan. "Euthanasia is always an option, even if you have to do it yourself. A bullet is cheap and more humane than a slaughterhouse."

Lynn Larson, a volunteer at Smith's horse rescue, said she's no PETA supporter and she's fine with hunting, but she said she draws the line at horse slaughterhouses.

"It's wasted money to spend \$75,000 to study a slaughter facility," said Larson, who has eight adopted horses. "That money could be better used to develop ways to help these animals."

She said horses are not like other livestock, such as cattle or sheep, and that there are alternatives to getting rid of unwanted horses - euthanasia being one of those. She added that besides other animal rescue and adoption programs, places like the Dakota Zoo can take donated horses and use them as feed for other animals.

Larson said people should use more responsibility before buying or breeding horses and know that they are financial burdens. She added, a slaughterhouse is "not going to make the problem go away."

But Todd Hall, a Dunn County rancher, said federal regulations banning the processing or sale of horse meat is an infringement on personal property rights.

"Those people have begun to strip our rights for pushing for an outright ban on meat harvest," Hall told the House committee. "Horses were chosen first because, let's face it, they have the best personalities."

Greg Brokaw, who owns a training stable in Ashley, cited a congressional report while testifying that found during the 1980s more than 300,000 horses were slaughtered. By 2006, that number had fallen to 105,000.

He added that taxpayers are feeding 38,000 unwanted horses kept on federal land with an annual price tag of \$17.6 million.

North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson said the study makes sense, saying a federal ban on horse slaughtering is bad policy.

"Why don't you just pass a law that makes it illegal for horses to die?" Johnson asked.

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