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PROMOTING THE HUMANE AND RESPONSIBLE TREATMENT OF HORSES

From Susan Wagner, President Equine Advocates

RE: Testimony before the Senate Standing Committee on Racing, Gaming & Wagering and the Standing Committee on Domestic Animal Welfare
Wednesday, June 5, 2019

Good morning! My name is Susan Wagner. I am the president of Equine Advocates, the national non-profit equine protection organization I founded in 1996.

I would like to thank Senators Addabbo and Martinez for holding this hearing and allowing me address their respective committees about the cruel and unnecessary slaughter of racehorses and the need for more funding of equine protection organizations that rescue and care for them.

In 2004, we moved our base of operations to Chatham, NY in Columbia County and established a 140-acre horse sanctuary currently home to 82 equines including horses, ponies, donkeys and mules. Just over 25% of our population is comprised of Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds. Our sanctuary is accredited by the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance and the Global Federation of Animals Sanctuaries.

What most of our sanctuary horses have in common is that they were rescued from slaughter or abusive situations. Some were abandoned.

Most of the Thoroughbreds here were either purchased out of kill pens, rescued by us in order to prevent them from ending up at low-end slaughter auctions or seized by police during cruelty raids, where three badly neglected Thoroughbreds in one particular case were so emaciated,

that they had to remain in an equine hospital for 31 days. It was later reported in the New York Times, that their owner, a former New York breeder, had been abusing and neglecting Thoroughbreds for years. He eventually was convicted and served jail time.

One of our Thoroughbred mares was discarded simply because she could not get in foal again. A Thoroughbred gelding who came to the sanctuary in 2011 had raced at Finger Lakes 51 times and then went on to the show circuit where he was passed from owner to owner until finally being discarded when he was 20. His second career did not protect him from falling through the cracks and had we not rescued him at the time, he would have met a cruel and unspeakable fate.

All of the Standardbreds we have saved over the years, *except for just one*, came from the Amish and Mennonites. We either bought them at slaughter auctions, or purchased them privately from Amish and Mennonite farmers in order to prevent them from ending up at meat auctions like New Holland, Sugar Creek, Unadilla and others. Most of them were in dire condition and in some cases had been very badly abused. As far as I am concerned, selling a Standardbred to Mennonites or the Amish is just a long route to the slaughterhouse – And yet, sadly, that is where most Standardbreds end up except for the lucky ones who are rescued.

Horse sanctuaries need much more industry funding and government support as well. The Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds we rescue are not candidates for retraining due to age, physical and/or behavioral problems – And as I previously mentioned, we have horses here at the sanctuary who had been retrained for second careers, only to be thrown away when they outlived their usefulness and could no longer compete.

Aftercare retraining programs are extremely important and must be supported, but so should horse sanctuaries. Most horses bred for racing never make it to the racetrack. An equally small number end their racing careers sound enough to be retrained, but many are not – **which is why horse sanctuaries are so important.**

Jeff Gural owns three racetracks – Vernon Downs and Tioga Downs in New York and The Meadowlands in New Jersey. He abhors horse slaughter and the use of performance-enhancing drugs. He does not permit them at his tracks. He also is a strong supporter of aftercare and has been vocal over the years about how to best raise money to save racehorses from slaughter and how to raise more funding in addition to the aftercare programs that already exist.

“Ending horse slaughter should be one of the easiest problems to solve,” he said. “Why wouldn’t we allocate one or two percent of the money generated by Thoroughbred and Standardbred racing to solve these problems? I don’t see why we can’t go to the legislature with a request to do this so that no horse in this state ends up at the killers.”

When I founded Equine Advocates more than 23 years ago, it was because of one main reason - to end horse slaughter. Prior to that, I had worked in the racing industry, but it wasn’t until I left racing that I found out that hundreds of thousands of equines were being slaughtered annually in horse slaughterhouses in this country, as well as being shipped live across our borders into Canada and Mexico for slaughter. At that time, in the ‘80’s and ‘90’s, the slaughter industry was extremely secretive and most people did not know it even existed. **It was in 1994 when I rescued my first horse from slaughter that I realized horse slaughter had become the garbage disposal for the horse industry. It gave irresponsible people a quick way to get rid of their inconvenient horses quickly and for a profit.**

Horse slaughter actually rewards these bad actors for their thoughtless and cruel behavior. To cold-hearted people like that, it’s just a matter of “Out of sight – out of mind.”

According to numerous polls, horse slaughter is strongly opposed by the vast majority of Americans. It is also highly unethical.

As horses are not bred for food, horsemeat is contaminated and often toxic due to the drugs equines are regularly given, including Phenylbutazone, or “Bute,” for short, the most common drug administered to horses.

According to Dr. Ann Marini, one of the authors of the 2010 landmark study

on the effects of Bute on humans who eat the meat of horses treated with this drug, ***“Bute causes bone-marrow depression and a host of frightening diseases which are fatal in a vast majority of cases. The elderly are more susceptible than younger adults. The risks for developing bone-marrow cancer and other life-threatening diseases are heightened because humans metabolize Bute differently than equines.”***

Bute is just one of numerous drugs that come with the warning, ***“Not intended for horses bred for human consumption.”***

NO horse is bred for human consumption! – So why are we continuing to sell our horses for people in other countries to eat when we know their meat is dangerous and not fit for human or animal consumption, for that matter?

Because a federal ban on horse slaughter has not been passed, we have to rely on Congress to pass language every two years that defunds horsemeat inspectors in our federal agriculture spending bills in order to prevent horse slaughter from returning to the U.S.

Thankfully, in 2007, the last horse slaughterhouse operating in the U.S. closed its doors and the number of equines slaughtered annually has dropped significantly since that time. But our horses are still being shipped live to suffer and die in Mexican and Canadian slaughterhouses. This has to stop! The fact is that slaughter encourages indiscriminate breeding and the large numbers of surplus horses being born every year. **Pass a federal bill thus removing the option of horse slaughter and we will have a much better and healthier horse industry.**

The late great horseman John Hettinger was passionate about ending equine slaughter. In a quote he gave me the year we honored him for all his work and dedication, he said, ***“I believe there is one catch phrase which is contributing to the confusion surrounding the present dialogue on horse slaughter. That phrase is ‘unwanted horses.’ They wanted them when they bought them, didn’t they? These individuals who justify casting a horse off like a piece of detritus at the end of his usefulness, are doing a great disservice to the concept of personal responsibility. Enabling a***

callous and irresponsible person to walk away from a problem, pocket a few hundred dollars, and feel good about it, is a disservice to our (racing) industry and the animal they profess to care about. In this they are helped by the enablers who refer to 'processing' rather than slaughter and 'plants' rather than slaughterhouse."

I invite all of you here today to visit our horse sanctuary that is only a 30-minute drive from Albany. All of our rescued equines play very important roles here. Some are for each other, as many horses need certain types of pasture mates to be with, especially in the cases of severely abused animals. Their bonds are often as strong as their dislikes and we are extremely cognizant of putting the right types of horses together so that they are happy and content where they are. We tell their stories to students and the public, and through these rescued equines, we help to educate people about the special needs of horses, the responsibility involved in having an equine under one's care and about the sheer joy of being around horses whether they can be ridden or not.

We have a Humane Education Center on the sanctuary grounds and provide students from schools in Chatham, Albany, Hillsdale and the surrounding environs the opportunity to take classes at our Center and then go outside on the property to meet and be around our rescued horses.

Our goal is to instill a sense of responsibility in these young people as well as help them develop an appreciation and love for horses so that as they become adults they will continue to view them as the amazing creatures that they truly are, never to be abused, neglected or slaughtered.

All of our programs that include Rescue Operations, Sanctuary and Humane Education require more funding in order to continue and grow. We try to make a difference in the lives of all the equines we rescue and that includes the horses bred for racing.

I would like to quote Dr. Patricia Hogan, the famed equine surgeon who we honored in Saratoga for testifying before Congress in 2006 in support of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. The bill passed in the House, but

sadly was blocked in the Senate. This gives you an idea of just how long this has been going on and why this issue finally needs to be resolved.

“As an equine veterinarian, there are grave welfare issues involved with the horse slaughter industry that made it impossible for me not to object to what was happening to these horses. You cannot expect the public to embrace the horses that support the racing industry, if it appears that the very people who race them care so little for their welfare.”

Since 2008 when Dr. Hogan made that statement, more money has been raised to support equine retirement programs. However, the funding is not nearly enough for what is needed to help the number of horses needing rescue and sanctuary.

Progress to end horse slaughter has been slow. However, just last week, awarding-winning journalist and turf writer, Jay Hovdey wrote an article calling for the racing industry to throw its full support behind federal legislation that would ban the slaughter of America’s horses.

Now *that* would be progress!

Susan Wagner