

Horses could be slaughtered for meat in U.S.

11:59 AM, Dec 1, 2011

WASHINGTON (USA TODAY) - Congress has lifted a de facto ban on the slaughter of horses, a move hailed by Missouri farmers and state political leaders who say the prohibition had inadvertently caused more harm to the animals than good.

But some animal-rights activists decried the little-noticed provision, which sailed to passage earlier this month and was signed into law by President Barack Obama on Nov. 18. And they vowed to keep the issue alive, pressing for an outright prohibition of horse slaughtering in the U.S.

At issue is a ban, first enacted in 2006, that prevented the U.S. Department of Agriculture from using federal funds to inspect any meat processing plants that slaughter horses. Plants that are not inspected by the USDA cannot ship meat across state lines, so the provision effectively ended domestic horse slaughter.

There is no U.S. market for the human consumption of horse meat. But it is seen as a delicacy overseas, especially in some European and Asian countries. In addition, horse meat has been used in the U.S. to feed zoo animals, because it's a good source of protein.

Farmers and some policymakers say the ban resulted in old horses being abandoned and neglected. In response, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., successfully pushed for a provision requiring the non-partisan Government Accountability Office to study the impact of the ban. The GAO study, released in June, highlighted the concerns of Baucus and others.

The GAO report concluded that the slaughter of American horses didn't stop because of the ban, but simply shifted to Mexico and Canada. "From 2006 through 2010, U.S. horse exports for slaughter increased by 148 and 660 percent to Canada and Mexico, respectively," the GAO report states. "As a result, nearly the same number of U.S. horses was transported to Canada and Mexico for slaughter in 2010 -- nearly 138,000 -- as was slaughtered before domestic slaughter ceased."

In addition, horse prices declined for those animals most likely to be bought for slaughter, the report concluded. The GAO said that comprehensive data was not available on abandonment and neglect, but that state and local governments, along with some animal welfare groups, reported an increase in investigations of such incidents since 2007. "State, local, tribal, and horse industry officials generally attributed these increases in neglect and abandonments to cessation of domestic slaughter and the economic downturn," the GAO stated.

The agency suggested that Congress should either reconsider restrictions on the use of federal funds to inspect horse slaughtering facilities or consider a permanent ban of horse slaughtering. Animal-rights groups have long pressed for the latter option -- and they hope they now have their opening.

Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, said he thinks that if horse slaughter plants reopen in the U.S. that will provide "juice" to the society's effort to pass a ban on the practice.

He said he agreed with GAO's conclusion that the federal USDA ban has not stopped horse slaughtering. But he questioned the contention that it has led to more abandonment or neglect of horses.

"It's largely fabrication," Pacelle said. He said that if about the same number of horses are being exported to Canada and Mexico for slaughter as were killed in the U.S. before the ban, it doesn't add up that there is also a spike in abandonment.

The lawmakers who have embraced the GAO study are "slaughter proponents," he charged. "And that they are crying crocodile tears over abandonment is essentially a cynical and hypocritical line of argument. And it's a little too convenient."

But for critics of the USDA ban, the GAO study provided the evidence they needed to move forward with repeal.

As the 2012 agriculture appropriations bill moved through Congress this year, Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Georgia, moved to strip out the USDA funding ban. A spokesman for Kingston, who is chairman of the House agriculture spending subcommittee, said the provision was ineffective in stopping slaughter, but it did kill jobs.

"It's a \$65 million industry in America -- it was before it was banned," said Chris Crawford, Kingston's spokesman.

The Humane Society and other groups say they think the repeal will prompt renewed interest in the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act of 2011, which would ban the interstate transport and live export of horses for slaughter for human consumption. The bill was introduced earlier this year by Sens. Mary Landrieu, D-La., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. There is companion legislation in the House.

The measure has been introduced in previous sessions, but could pass this time, Pacelle said, if there's fresh evidence of horse slaughter in the U.S.

"I think what will happen now is we will see cosponsoring of both bills accelerate as there's more talk of opening slaughter houses in the United States," he said.