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U.S. Horse Processing Could Resume Soon

by: Pat Raia • November 30 2011 • Article # 19216

Now that federal lawmakers have declined to defund USDA inspections at plants that process horsemeat for human consumption, horse processing in the United States could resume before the end of the year, according to horse processing proponent Wyoming State Rep. Sue Wallis. Wallis sponsored legislation facilitating horse processing plant development in Wyoming and is affiliated with pro-processing groups including United Horsemen and the International Equine Business Association.

Prior to 2005, USDA personnel carried out horsemeat food safety inspections at horse processing plants in the United States. In 2006 Congress voted to strip the USDA of funding for horsemeat inspections. USDA personnel continued to conduct those inspections on a fee-for-service basis until 2007 when a federal court judge ruled against the arrangement. The combination of the funding prohibition and the court decision resulted in the decline of the horse processing industry in the U.S. Since then, appropriations bills have contained amendments denying USDA horsemeat inspection funding. As a result, American horses have been shipped to Mexico and Canada for processing.

Resumption of domestic horse processing became possible on Nov. 17, when Congress passed H.R. 2112. The bill established budgets for the Department of Agriculture through September 2012, but does not contain language specifically defunding USDA horse processing plant inspections. The bill became law on Nov. 18 when President Barak Obama signed it.

With USDA horsemeat inspection funding restored, processing proponents hope to get U.S. horse processing plants on line as soon as possible, Wallis said.

"My best guess is somewhere between 30 to 90 days would be a best case scenario," Wallis said.

Since no horse processing plants currently operate in the United States, Wallis said that horsemeat production could initially take place at existing meat processing plants retrofitted to process horses. Meanwhile, plants specifically designed for horse processing could be developed in any state except Texas, California, Illinois, and Oklahoma, where state laws specifically prohibit horse slaughter plant operations.

"Ultimately, we would like to see perhaps four to six small- to medium-sized, well-run (horse processing) plants scattered across the country so that no horse has to be trucked too far," Wallis said.

But Nancy Perry, senior vice president of government relations for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals believes reestablishing the U.S. horse processing industry might not be easy. High costs could discourage prospective investors from backing new horse processing plant development, and convincing meat processing plant operators to embrace horse processing could also be difficult, Perry said.

"Investors always follow the money," Perry said. "Even to retrofit a plant for horse processing is expensive, and depending upon where the plant is, there could be zoning regulations that wouldn't allow for horse slaughter."

At the same time, horse processing operations will remain controversial, Perry said.

"Even in processing-friendly communities the plants will be under intense scrutiny from other parts of the country," Perry said.

Habitat for Horses President Jerry Finch said equine welfare advocates are already gearing up to respond if horse processing plants open anywhere in the United States.

"Our forces are planning our own moves," Finch said. "I can guarantee that we will represent the majority."

Seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian before proceeding with any diagnosis, treatment, or therapy.

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