

WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THE HORSES AND WHAT ARE THEY EATING?

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ABSTRACT

A downturn in the economy, closure of the nation's horse processing facilities and other factors has resulted in many unwanted horses. Horse numbers in the western states have decreased recently, although likely not in proportion to declines in sales of horse related products and hay. Last year's high hay prices, on top of a poor economy, likely drove many horse owners to relinquish their horses or cut back significantly on horse related expenses. Horse owners are buying less hay and conserving on all horse related costs as possible. Detrimental health effects on horses may occur during protracted periods of reduced feed and other health care.

Key words: hay, unwanted horse

What happened to all the horses and what are they eating? This is a very good question; a question that is difficult to answer and maybe impossible to answer.

Everyone has heard some kind of story about people desperate to get rid of unwanted horses: Horses being abandoned at boarding or training stables or left at sales yards, horses being put in other people's horse trailers at horse events; horses being turned loose on river bottoms, landfills, desert areas, national parks; horses being shot on farms and in remote areas. The stories are plentiful about people who are no longer willing or able to provide care for horses they no longer want.

The unwanted horse is a relatively new but well known term. The Unwanted Horse Coalition (UHC), an organization that grew out of an American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) 2005 initiative, defines the unwanted horses as, "horses which are no longer wanted by their current owner because they are old, injured, sick, unmanageable, fail to meet their owner's expectations (e.g., performance, color or breeding), or their owner can no longer afford them."

In 2007, from data from the United States Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the UHC determine that there were approximately 170,000 unwanted horses each year. This number was derived as the sum of horses processed at slaughter houses in the U.S., Canada and Mexico and un-adopted wild horses managed by the BLM.

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In the fall of 2008, the UHC conducted a nationwide study to assess the problem of the unwanted horse. Their 2009 Unwanted Horse Survey was conducted to gather national metrics from horse owners and stake holders in the horse industry that could be useful in identifying and possibly creating solutions to the problem of the unwanted horse. Survey results from over 20,000 respondents were summarized to gather information on the magnitude of the unwanted horse problem, to gather factual evidence for decision-making related to solutions to the problem, and to establish a baseline for measuring progress in generation of awareness, education and action.

The following lists are results of the 2009 Unwanted Horse Survey

Contributing factors to the problem of unwanted horses, as determined by the survey, included:

1. Downturn in the economy
2. Closing of the nation's processing facilities
3. Change in breed demand/indiscriminate breeding
4. High cost of euthanasia.

Other notable contributing factors included:

1. Inability to sell horses/lack of buyers
2. Age of horse owner/physically unable to care for the horse
3. Lack of responsibility/attitude of owner.

More specifically, reasons why horses become unwanted included:

1. Economics (affordability) – the most commonly cited reasons
2. Old age/injury to the horse
3. Loss of owner interest/use for the horse
4. Unmanageability of the horse
5. Change in owner employment status

More than 90% of the respondents felt that the number of unwanted horses is increasing. More than 80% felt that unwanted horses are a big problem in the past year. Twenty to 30% of respondents felt that unwanted horses were a big problem 3 years ago. The majority of unwanted horses were formerly recreational horses rather than breeding horses, show horses or race horses.

The economics/affordability of horses is the most commonly cited reason why horses become unwanted. The downturn in the economy is reflected in the sales of products sold to horse owners. Finding specific and current data is difficult, but several individuals interviewed for this paper spoke of declines in equine pharmaceutical sales and in feed stores sales of about 30% compared to last year. The general consensus is that hay sales to horse owners has declined dramatically as well, although tracking the ultimate consumption of hay after it leaves the grower is likely difficult to accomplish.

Does a 30% decline in feed store and pharmaceutical sales mean that there are 30% fewer horses in our region? Likely not. Where could this many horses go? California has somewhere between 500,000 and 1,000,000 horses. Even at 500,000, where could 150,000 horses go in the last year or even the last few years? Certainly a percentage of horses die. If a horse was assigned an average life span of 10 years (accounting for numerous losses of horses at young age due to illness or injury; and setting the life span at much shorter than an average of closer to 17 years for generally healthy and reasonable cared for horses), then 10% of the population of horses could die every year. That could account for 50,000 horses per year, provided that no new horses were born or brought into the area. While horse registration numbers and breed association memberships have shown a decline, there are still horses being raised.

Horses could also be sold that leave the area, but the glut of horses throughout the U.S. would cast doubt on a theory that a large number of horses are being sold to other states.

Horses have been sold that go to processing plants in Mexico and Canada. During 2007, it was estimated that 44,475 horses were shipped to Mexico and 35,000 horses were shipped to Canada for processing for human consumption. This number is significantly higher than in previous years, and is largely thought to be due to the closure of the three processing facilities in the United States. But even if this number was closer to 100,000 horses, per year, this number represents horses leaving the entire U.S., not California or the western states.

Interviews with stable owners and horse dealers show a trend for fewer horse sales and less turn-over of horses. Older buyers, a growing demographic group, appear to want to buy older, well trained horses, often even at a higher price, rather than younger horses and prospects, that might be bought for less money, but that represent more of a gamble regarding the abilities of the horse for any particular activity. As horses are sold or die, fewer replacements, on the whole, are bought.

Despite death loss and non-replacement, and horses leaving to foreign processing plants, there are still a lot of horses in our region, state and nation; more than would be expected based on the downturn in the sales of horse related products; if one assumes that the level of feed and care is the same. However, a decrease in feed store sales could be a reduction in the sale of nonessential products like fly spray or brushes, lead ropes or tack. More expensive brand name bagged feeds could be replaced by less expensive mill made feeds with less expensive ingredients and less fortification with vitamins and minerals. Fewer vaccinations, wormers and common medicines are no doubt purchased when pharmaceutical sales are down, but a reduction in preventive medicine sales may be the owner's decision and not a reflection of total fewer horses; just more unvaccinated/unwormed and fewer well-medicated horses. The detrimental health effects of these practices are difficult to determined but are likely not insignificant.

A reduction in hay sales is more problematic for horse health, as while horses can go for a while without vaccinations or wormers, or even fly spray, they can't go very long without eating.

Some horse owners are seeking less expensive hay, accepting poorer quality hay or hay that is weedy or sun- or rain-damaged. Many horse owners are buying less hay, and trying to stretch hay farther. Hay is being fed more conservatively, by the flake instead of by the bale. Horses are fed only enough to eat and no over feeding is done. No longer is uneaten hay allowed to contribute to bedding or to fill in muddy places in fields or paddocks. Some horse owners are buying bagged forage, which may or may not be a saving compared to baled hay, as there is less shrink or loss from broken bales. Pellets are easier to feed out of a feeder, and with less waste. Some horses are being fed even more creatively. Some may be fed lawn clippings – from the owner’s yard or from local landscapers’ green waste. Previously urban dwelling horses may be shipped to more rural settings, where any type of pasture or volunteer grass is used as feed; even dead grass.

If a horse owner cuts back on feeding horses, subtle body weight losses may go unnoticed for relatively long periods of time. The National Research Council’s Nutrient Requirements of Horses (2006) summarized research data related to weight gain in mature horses. From a table that described estimated increases in digestible energy necessary to change body condition score of a 500 kg (1100 lbs.) horse, it was estimated that an increase of digestible energy intake of 11 to 14 percent above the maintenance energy requirement would result in an increase in body condition score from 4 to 5 over a period of 180 days. A change in body condition score from 4 to 5 on a nine point scale (Henneke, 1983) (from a body condition described as moderately thin to a condition described as moderate) was determined in the same table to require 16 to 20 kgs of body weight gain, and further that 1 kg of body weight change requires 20 Mcal of digestible energy above maintenance. One might speculate that a similar estimate could be made for decreases in digestible energy necessary to reduce body condition score. If a horse is cut back on feed by 11 to 14%, it might take 6 months for the horse’s body condition to decline from moderate to moderately thin. Another six months might result in a change of body condition score from 4 to 3, or from moderately thin to thin. The time required to change body condition score from 4 to 3 might be longer, as less body weight requires lower maintenance energy expenditure. In the busy lives of horse owners, when horses are often looked at only when they are fed, which could be in the dark for both the morning and evening feedings, it is possible that a horse could lose considerable body weight and condition over a long enough period of time that it goes unnoticed until the horse is very thin. Anecdotal reports of increasing numbers of thin horses, especially in suburban and rural areas support a notion that many horses are being fed less and/or fed lower quality feeds.

A decline in hay sales is likely a more reliable indicator of a downturn in the entire horse industry than feed store sales or pharmaceutical sales. Horses have to eat, and there are few alternatives to hay in the arid western states. A decline in horse numbers has no doubt contributed to a downturn in horse hay sales. But the price of hay in last year’s hay market was likely the biggest cause of the downturn in horse numbers. More than one person has cited last

year's hay price as the "last straw" that drove horse businesses out of business and horse owners to either get rid of a horse or decide not to purchase or raise another one.

What is the solution for the unwanted horse? The Unwanted Horse Survey concluded that solutions to the problem of unwanted horses include:

1. Educate owners to purchase and own horses responsibly
2. Increase ability of private rescue/retirement facilities to care for unwanted horses
3. Reopen U.S. processing plants
4. Increase options and resources to euthanize unwanted horses

Surely, an upturn in the economy will help both the horse and the hay industry. People own horses because they like them, and often will sacrifice many other luxuries before the horse. Even a moderate return to prosperity, coupled with reasonable hay prices, will likely cause the horse industry to rebound to an extent commensurate with the economy.

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