

Legislation, Rulings Fuel Horse Slaughter Controversy

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WASHINGTON, DC--At issue is the operation of three foreign-owned plants in the United States that process horse meat and export it to France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Japan and other countries.

The industry exports \$30 million in horsemeat annually, which represents 90,000 horses slaughtered domestically and another 20,000 to 25,000 horses exported to Canada and Mexico for slaughter.

The House passed legislation by a wide margin late last year that would ban the "shipping, transporting, moving, delivering, receiving, possessing, purchasing, selling or donation of horses" for the purpose of slaughter "for human consumption."

Congress adjourned before the Senate could vote on the bill, but it was reintroduced in the House Jan. 17, along with companion legislation in the Senate.

Both bills await committee hearings. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., said her office has received more than 900 letters and telephone calls in support of the slaughter ban.

"I feel very optimistic about our capacity, once again, to get the bill out of the House, and we would like to do it as early as possible so we don't run into the problem that we had at the end of the session last year," she said.

"The folklore of our country is very much wrapped up in horses," Schakowsky said. "So it has a very special place for us, and it's not just a food source or an animal to be raised for slaughter."

Supporters of the legislation said they feel they picked up momentum when a panel of judges from the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans ruled in their favor Jan. 20.

The panel upheld a Texas ban on slaughtering horses for human consumption. The action came after the two Texas plants, Beltex Corp. of Fort Worth and Dallas Crown of Kaufman, filed suit challenging the law. They argued that the ban violated the Constitution's commerce clause and federal meat inspection laws.

The plants' attorney, David Broiles, said his clients plan to appeal the ruling to the full court, and possibly to the Supreme Court. The plants have until Friday to appeal, but neither the full appeals court nor the Supreme Court is obligated to hear the case.

Charlie Stenholm, a former Texas congressman and a spokesman for all three slaughterhouses, said the court ruling "caught everybody by surprise."

Stenholm said Monday afternoon that he did not know if the plants were operating at full capacity and that their status could change quickly.

The third U.S. processing plant, Cavel International in DeKalb, Ill., has faced similar state legislative efforts.

A bill banning horse slaughter passed the Illinois House a couple of years ago, but was defeated in the Senate, said James Tucker, Cavel's general manager. This year, another bill has been proposed to shut down the plant.

Activists on both sides of the issue pepper their conversation liberally with "us" and "them" terminology.

"We fully respect the right of any horse owner that does not wish their horse to go to slaughter for human consumption to not have it go to slaughter," Stenholm said. "As a private property right, we just believe that option should remain there for those who do not object, who would like to receive value and have the end of their horse's life done in that way."

Supporters of the slaughter ban see action at the state level as the first steps toward a national processing halt.

Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States, said the group was "of course thrilled" by the appellate court's unanimous ruling, which overturned a lower court ruling. He called the lower court's ruling a "serious misreading of the law."

"There is very little wiggle room in that decision," Pacelle said of the appellate court ruling. "These plants need to shut down, and this is two-thirds of the U.S. base of the industry. So it's enormously significant in terms of our goal of banning horse slaughter in the United States."

Pacelle asserted that an appeal by the plants would be futile, and the chances of the Supreme Court agreeing to hear the case are slim.

"It's a dead end for them, and they need to see the handwriting on the wall and get out of this sordid, inhumane business. ... The end is near for horse slaughter in the United States," Pacelle said.