

HOT EQUINE ISSUES

Unwanted horses — *Are Wild Horses, Retired Racehorses and “Premarin Mares” to Blame?*

By **DORINDA TROUTMAN,**
RMR STAFF WRITER

[Editor's Note: This is the fourth article in our series about the issue of Unwanted Horses, and the related topics of slaughter, euthanasia, rendering, animal law and cruelty to animals.]

Among the many recent letters to RMR about the unwanted horse issue have been a couple from writers who have put the blame on wild horses as being a major cause of horse overpopulation. Another letter came from a reader who had adopted a “Premarin horse” and wanted more information on the Premarin mare and foal industry. (Read the letters in the April 2008 RMR).

The Unwanted Horse issue is complicated, with no clear answers, but we have collected some facts about wild horses, Premarin mares and foals, and the horse racing industry. They all contribute to overpopulation. There are more horses than there are people who want them — except those people in the horse meat industry.]

According to the Unwanted Horse Coalition, “there are no

accurate figures to document how many unwanted horses actually exist, their age and sex, the breeds represented, how many are purebred versus grade, their most recent use, their value, or what happens to them in the long run. Tens of thousands of horses that could be classified as ‘unwanted’ are being sent to processing facilities... each year.”



Wild Horses and Burros

In 1971, the Wild Horse and Burro Act became law. According to a 2006 report, the

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had, by that time, removed a total of 231,925 wild horses and 36,784 burros from the range. Of the total horses and burros removed, 216,942 had been adopted.

Although the amount of land — approximately 53.5 million acres of herd management areas — has remained the same since 1971, demands on the public land in terms of livestock and wildlife grazing needs have changed and forced a reduction in the total number of wild horses. In 1980, at peak population, 62,638 wild horses and burros lived on the range. February 2007 statistics show the BLM managing 28,563 wild horses and burros. Goals for the wild horse and burro free range population are 27,492 animals.

As RMR stated in the April 2008 issue, about 31,000 wild horses and burros are being held in BLM corrals and in privately-owned large pastures

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contracted to the BLM. Some of those horses have been held for years.

In 2005 a law came into effect authorizing and directing the BLM to sell excess animals more than 10 years of age, or that had been offered unsuccessfully for adoption at least three times. An estimated 7,000 to 8,000 animals fell into the category created by the law. The BLM has urged public lands ranchers and Indian tribes to consider buying wild horses that must be sold under that law. As of January 2008, the BLM had sold more than 2,500 of these horses and burros.

The BLM has continued to state its policy and commitment not to sell wild horses for slaughter and to find permanent homes for them, both through its adoption program and at private treaty sales.

Read RMR's related article this month, "PZP, Equine Contraceptive" — about preventing wild horse pregnancy.

Pending legislation

Two bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress in the past year that could affect both wild and privately-owned horses.

H.B. 503/S. 311 would end the slaughter of American horses for human consumption and prohibit their export to other countries for slaughter (passed by the House; passed by Senate committee; and now in the Senate for consideration).

H.R. 249 restores the pro-

hibition on the commercial sale and slaughter of wild free-roaming horses and burros (passed by the House; now in the Senate for consideration).

Find more information on wild horses and burros, including how and where to adopt one, at the BLM Wild Horse and Burro website: www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/html, and then click on **Programs; Wild Horses & Burros**.



Premarin Production Industry

Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, the company which has made the hormone drug Premarin since 1942, describes the drug as one to be used by women after menopause or hysterectomy to “reduce hot flashes, to treat dryness, itching and burning in or around the vagina, and to help reduce the chances of osteoporosis.”

Premarin (PMU) is basically isolated estrone (an equine hor-

mone) from pregnant mare's urine (**PRE**gnant **MARE**s' ur**INE**). Premarin was once the most prescribed drug in the U.S. (1975 to 1999).

At one time, mares in the PMU industry numbered between 50,000 to 60,000 in North America. The PMU horses were owned by 400 to 500 ranchers under contract to Wyeth in Western Canada and the Midwestern United States.

Premarin mares are often draft breeds, due to their larger urine output and quiet temperament. In the spring, mares are put out to pasture to have their foals and be bred. When mares are about four to five months pregnant, and their hormone levels have increased, foals are weaned and the mares are then tied in standing tall with some bedding and enough room to lie down, for the remaining five to six months of pregnancy. They are fitted and strapped into urine collection devices.

In 1995, the North American Equine Ranching Council was created to assist PMU ranchers in education, breeding and marketing better foals, which are still sold mainly to feedlot operators, who feed them like cattle and then send them to slaughter in Canada for Canadian, European and Asian markets.

After the Journal of the American Medical Association published research in 1999

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about a relationship between hormone therapy and health problems such as breast cancer, heart attack and stroke, sales of Premarin dropped dramatically. However, according to Wyeth, it remains the fourth most prescribed drug in the U.S. and Canada, and is Canada's most lucrative pharmaceutical export.

According to the HSUS, beginning in October, 2003, Wyeth canceled one-third of all contracts and reduced all other herds by 35%, leaving less than 50% of PMU mares in production. This caused about 40,000 mares and foals to go to auction, and each year since then, a decrease in demand for Premarin has cut the population of mares. Currently there are about 5,000 mares in production, with most producing a foal each year.

Wyeth Pharmaceuticals spokesperson Natalie de Vane says, "We have no plans for changing the number of ranches we have contracts with in the future. Right now we have contracts with 70 ranches that have about 5,000 mares."

Greg Dowling of Bitterroot Drug in Hamilton, Montana, has been a pharmacist for 28 years and agrees that in the last ten years estrogen from pregnant mares' urine has been prescribed about 50% less. He now compounds topical estrogen creams made from plant or

synthetic hormones.

Peg Brownlee, a pharmacist who lives in Florence, Montana, adopted a Premarin industry horse after prescribing Premarin for years and feeling that she needed to do something for the horses used and bred in the production of the hormone.

"Premarin prescriptions are down dramatically in the past ten years – at least 50% — and that's a good thing. There are so many safer alternatives now," she says.

One of the largest PMU rescue and adoption organizations is **PMU Rescue** at [www-wpmurescue.org](http://www.wpmurescue.org).



Horse racing industry

According to a 2005 study by the American Horse Council, of the 9.2 million horses in the U.S., up to 844,500 horses are involved in the horse racing industry. These include Thoroughbreds, Standardbreds, Quarter Horses, Paints, Appaloosas, and Arabians. Thousands are re-

tired from racing each year due to injury, low performance or age.

A few are retired to breeding facilities or live out their days on an owner's farm. A few thousand find new careers as pleasure or show horses, either by direct sales at the track or training facility, or adoption after re-training through rescue organizations.

"We have no central source of the number of horses that are retired from racing each year," says Christopher Scherf, Executive Vice President of Thoroughbred Racing Associations, in Elkton, Maryland.

"There were 72,966 starters in 2007," he explains, when asked how many individual horses were racing last year.

"What I do know is that not many retired racehorses go to slaughter. They would not pass inspection for human consumption due to so many having been given the drug Clenbuterol, which is very commonly administered to racehorses."

Clenbuterol is a drug given as a decongestant and bronchodilator. It is used as an asthma drug in humans and as treatment for allergic respiratory disease in horses. It also induces a greater proportion of muscle to fat.

Gen Sullivan, spokesperson for the Standardbred

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Retirement Foundation in Hampton, New Jersey, scoffed at the idea that drugs would prevent Thoroughbreds or Standardbreds from going to auction. “That’s total bunk. More thoroughbreds go to auction than any other breed,” she states. “Once a horse goes to auction, it disappears, as far as the breed information goes,” she explains. “While

we don’t buy any horses to get them into our adoption program, people do report the Standardbreds they see at auctions and we contact supporters who buy them and give them to us to find homes for.”

Chris Colflesh, Executive Director of CANTER (an ex-Thoroughbred racehorse retirement alliance), Ohio, says “I see the truck from the local auction yard every Friday waiting at the racetrack to pick up horses that are then sold for slaughter.”

Allie Conrad, Executive Director of CANTER, Mid Atlantic, says, “We see Thoroughbreds go to slaughter buyers every day. Absolutely. They are a constant supply at the kill pens. I’d say that 20% to 30% of all horses going to kill buyers on the East Coast are Thoroughbreds. None of them are tested for drugs. We get a lot of queries asking if we have the kill price (about \$500) to buy a horse so that it doesn’t have to go to slaughter.”



Two of the most well-known non-profit organization that retrain and find homes for retired racehorses are the **Standardbred Retirement Foundation** at www.adop-tahorse.org; **CANTER**, at www.canterusa.org; and the **Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation** at www.trfinc.org.

No Clear Answers

Although horses from the above categories contribute to the overall horse population, they do not make up the entirety of the “unwanted horse” population. Remember, there are no firm figures for the numbers of unwanted horses.

Add to those figures the unknown thousands of horses humanely euthanized each year and thousands more being held by horse rescue organizations and the BLM.

Population History

According to USDA–APHIS, the total number of equids (horses, mules, ponies

and donkeys) on farms peaked at 25.2 million in 1920 (with about one fifth being mules). After that date many horses and mules were replaced by motorized vehicles.

An American Horse Council study released in 2005 states that the horse population of 9.2 million had increased by 33% between 2000 and 2005, but the number of horse owners had increased by less than 5%, and the average expense to keep a horse had risen to \$2,882 per year.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, in 1961, the first year population data was gathered, the population of horses in the U.S. was 2,367,000. By 2000 it was 5,240,000; and in 2006 it was 9,500,000.

In 2007, the USDA surveyed Michigan equine owners in 2007 and gathered some surprising information, and some not so surprising, that may be indicative of other northern states.

The survey found that there are more horses, donkeys, mules and miniatures in Michigan than eleven years ago — up to 155,000 from 130,000 in 1996.

Most were being used for recreation and pleasure (57,500). Horse racing figures declined while trail riding increased.

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Breeding and “idle” horses were next in population, with 21,000 each. Idle was described as a horse maintained for grazing or as a pet. Horse operations had increased as well, up to 35,000 as compared to 27,500 in 1996, with two-thirds having fewer than ten horses.

Slaughter figures

U.S. slaughter figures since 1989 bring up more questions than they answer:

Year	U.S. slaughter plants closed
2007	
2006	104,899
2005	91,757
2004	65,976
2003	50,564
2002	42,312
2001	55,776
2000	47,134
1999	62,813
1998	72,120
1997	88,086
1996	113,399
1995	112,677
1994	109,353
1993	184,320
1992	243,585
1991	236,467
1990	315,192
1989	342,877

The highest figures reflect the years after the “mad cow” disease outbreak in England in the late 1980s, when horsemeat was considered a safer meat to eat in Europe, and prices rose.

A recent American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) report states that

in 2006, 10,783 horses were shipped to Mexico for slaughter; and that in 2007, 44,475 horses were shipped to Mexico — an increase of 312%.

Price per pound

In 2001 an average 1,000-pound horse was selling for about \$600 to \$800 to killer buyers for slaughter. Now the prices have lowered to \$30 to \$150 in many states. “Meatier” horses sell for more.

Twin Falls Livestock Auction, in Idaho, reports horses under 1,100 pounds selling for \$5 to \$10 per hundred-weight; and horses more than 1,100 pounds selling for \$10 to \$20 per hundred-weight in March, 2008. Missoula Livestock Exchange reports that canner prices in their April 2008 sale were about \$450 per head (\$37.74) for a 1,200-pound, #1 (fat) horse; and \$327 (\$29.75) for an 1,100-pound, #2 horse. Thin horses were selling for only \$50 per head.

Jacobs Livestock & Rodeo in Great Falls, MT, tells us that they have a standing “buy order” from a slaughter buyer in Canada for 1,000-pound horses at eight-to-ten cents per pound.

Justin Tupper at the St. Onge Livestock Company in St. Onge, SD, reports: “Number 1 horses (1,000 pounds or more) are selling for 38–45 cents per pound. Younger and smaller horses are selling for next-to-nothing to 15 cents per pound.

Breed registration figures

Registration numbers from most of the top pure breeds in the U.S. reflect the poor economy, high fuel and feed prices, low slaughter prices and the economic impact of horse ownership:

- Quarter Horse registrations in the U.S. were 144,236 in 2006 and 117,830 in 2007, down 26,406.
- Paint Horse registrations for 2007 were 35,032; down from 39,357 in 2006.
- Thoroughbred registrations have declined since 1998, when 40,333 foals were registered in the U.S., to 34,350 foals registered in 2007.
- Tennessee Walking Horse registrations decreased in 2007 to 9,345 from 13,366 in 2006.
- Arabian Horse registrations declined 7% from 2006 to 2007. Half-Arabians declined by 11%. AHA registrations were 7,003 in 2006, and 6,520 in 2007.
- Appaloosa Horse Club registrations decreased 12 percent between 2006 and 2007, with 6,749 registered in 2006 and 5,945 registered in 2007.
- Morgan Horse registrations increased slightly to 3,482 in 2007 from 3,461 in 2006.
- Missouri Fox Trotter registrations were 2,840 in 2006 and 2,452 in 2007.
- Paso Fino registrations were 2,408 in 2006 and 1,844 in 2007.

