

Horse Slaughter Request Spurs Outcry

Plant Owner Defends Plan for Horse Meat

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By Rene Romo

Journal Southern Bureau

LAS CRUCES — A Roswell area meatprocessing plant's bid to begin slaughtering horses for human consumption in foreign markets has sparked a bipartisan backlash by high-profile state figures, including the governor.

But Rick De Los Santos, part-owner of Valley Meat Co., said he is just trying to fill a niche, provide jobs and continue production in a plant he has operated for 22 years. The plant would be the first in the nation in recent years.

"I have applied to be able to slaughter equine, and that's all I've done. If I get it (USDA approval), I get it. If I don't, I don't know what I'll do," said De Los Santos, 52, who said he laid off his last 10 employees three weeks ago because of the lack of work. "It's not against the law. Now it's legal to slaughter horses in the U.S. for human consumption. People here might not want it, but there are people who do want it."

Gov. Susana Martinez, a Republican, and Attorney General Gary King and State Land Commissioner Ray Powell, both Democrats, voiced opposition to the horse slaughtering plan Friday.

King called the prospect of a horse slaughtering operation in the Roswell area "a terrible idea" while Powell, a veterinarian, said: "New Mexico can do much better by these intelligent and gentle creatures."

Martinez's office said the governor plans to send a letter to the USDA urging the federal agency not to allow the horse slaughtering operation, and she will seek the support of New Mexico's delegation in Washington, D.C.

"A horse's companionship is a way of life for many people across New Mexico. We rely on them for work and bond with them through their loyalty," Martinez said. "Despite the federal government's decision to legalize horse slaughter for human consumption, I believe creating a horse slaughter industry in New Mexico is wrong and I am strongly opposed."

While horse slaughter has not been directly banned in the United States, industrial operations have been effectively blocked since 2006 when Congress chose not to fund the legally required USDA inspections of horses bound for slaughter. However, last year Congress funded the USDA inspections in an agriculture spending bill signed by President Barack Obama.

Powell and King's criticism was part of a joint statement issued by the Humane Society of the United States, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the Colorado-based Front Range Equine Rescue and Animal Protection of New Mexico.

The Valley Meat Co., in December and again on March 1, submitted an application for USDA inspection of its 7,290-square-foot plant so that it can begin custom slaughtering and processing of horses.

If he receives USDA approval, De Los Santos said he planned to slaughter 20 to 25 horses per day to start "which is not a whole lot, compared to what's available."

De Los Santos said more than 100,000 American horses are shipped out of the country to slaughterhouses in Mexico and Canada, from which some of the meat is exported to Europe and Asia. "All I'm saying is we can take some of those and slaughter them here," De Los Santos said.

De Los Santos said the meat from his plant would be exported by an El Paso partner, whom he declined to name, into Mexico. "Everyone who's ever eaten tacos in Mexico, I guarantee you they've eaten horse meat down there," he said. "It would never be my intention to sell it in the U.S."

Valley Meat's application to the USDA was disclosed this week by Front Range Equine Rescue, which obtained USDA documents and email through a federal records request.

Meanwhile, several Roswell area officials, including the executive director of the Chamber of Commerce, said Friday they are trying to get information about the company's plans before staking out a position.

"I would not want to venture an opinion until I have some facts upon which to base an opinion," said Chaves County Commissioner Greg Nibert.

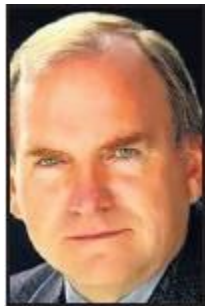
The Humane Society and Front Range have petitioned the Food and Drug Administration to declare that meat from former companion, show and work horses to be unfit for humans because of the risk that the meat contains residual toxins administered to the animals during their lifetime. For that reason, the groups have also asked the USDA to ban the slaughter of those horses for human consumption.

De Los Santos said he understands that many Americans oppose the idea of slaughtering horses for consumption, but he said the foreign demand is there, and he is just trying to make a living with a facility now dormant. He said he is not seeking state or local financial help, and all the investment will come from foreign sources.

"Finally, finally today I see an opportunity where I could make a good living, and provide 40 to 50 good jobs, and now I have all the activists, and the governor, coming after me," De Los Santos said. "I'm going to try to do what I need to make a living, and that's not against the law." **Coming Sunday**
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KING: Calls plan 'terrible idea'



MARTINEZ: Urges USDA to stop plant