

Statement of
The Honorable Bob Goodlatte
Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture
To
The Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection
Of the House Energy and Commerce Committee
Regarding
Hearing on H.R. 503, a Bill to Amend the Horse Protection Act
July 25, 2006

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome the opportunity to bring some sense to the discussion about banning horse owners from making decisions for themselves. This is an important topic, not only to horse owners and tax payers. It also has broader and far-reaching implications for the entire animal agricultural community. The proponents of H.R.503 are not engaged in a public policy discussion, they are engaged in a public relations campaign. They have bumper stickers and they have sound bites. They do not have the facts. As Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee I have a duty and a responsibility to be guided by sound fact and reason. You will note that the other witnesses testifying in opposition to H.R.503 are all experts in their fields, have significant experience, and have based their testimony on the facts.

So let's look at the facts. More than 60 reputable horse organizations, animal health organizations, and agricultural organizations have joined together to oppose this legislation, and they represent some of the most respected people who own and care for horses in the United States.

The American Quarter Horse Association, the largest association of horse owners in the world, strongly opposes this legislation. The American Paint Horse Association, the second largest association of horse owners, opposes this legislation. More than a dozen State horse councils oppose this legislation, including the Virginia Horse Council. Ten states represented on this subcommittee have State horse councils that oppose this legislation: New York State, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, Texas, Colorado, Florida and Wisconsin.

H.R.503 is also opposed by those who see to the health of our horses, very respected organizations like the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Equine Practitioners. More than 7,000 veterinarians, the people who provide health care for our nation's horses, are concerned about the implications of this legislation. They, as I, are concerned that if enacted, the bill would negatively impact the health and welfare of horses across the country and

would significantly increase the numbers, and problem of, unwanted horses in the U.S.

Other organizations opposed to this legislation include the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Equine Nutrition and Physiology Society, the Animal Welfare Council, the National Horse Show Commission, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and many, many others.

As a public policy matter this issue should be about what is the best approach for the humane treatment of horses. Like most Americans, I support the humane treatment of all animals, including those on our nation's farms and stockyards, in research facilities, processing plants, exhibitions, and in our homes. Further, I believe that inhumane treatment of animals should not be tolerated. It is our responsibility to be good stewards of the land and the animals under our charge.

Having said that, what do we do to solve the problem of unwanted horses in America? What are the rights of individuals to decide what to do with their animals? What are the implications for other livestock sectors if we ban humane slaughter for one species? Why would the Federal government put a legitimate business and in effect thousands of people out of work? These are just a few of the unresolved public policy implications of this legislation.

Organizations that represent literally millions of horse owners in this country and elsewhere around the world oppose this legislation because of their concern, not about whether somebody else is eating horsemeat, but whether hundreds of thousands of horses will be treated humanely if we make this dramatic change. What will happen to the approximately 65,000-95,000 horses per year that currently are processed in the U.S. horse slaughter plants, as well as the estimated more than 25,000 that are sent to Canada and Mexico for slaughter, if humane euthanasia in a horse processing facility is no longer an option? Right now the only Federally regulated transportation and euthanasia of horses are the programs that this bill seeks to abolish. Ironically, government supervision of humane treatment of horses would be the first casualty of H.R.503.

Unlike many of the very wealthy horse owners pushing this legislation, many owners are no longer able to provide financial or physical humane care for their horses. Many horses are infirm, have behavioral problems, or are dangerous. There are many reasons why a horse becomes unwanted. There are not nearly enough rescue/retirement facilities available to take care of the current numbers of unwanted horses. This bill would drastically and exponentially increase the numbers of unwanted horses, leaving many to abandonment, neglect, or starvation. Horse owners should continue to have the

option to choose slaughter for equine they no longer can or desire to appropriately tend.

The proponents of H.R.503 don't seem to care about the problems passage of their legislation would create. If their true purpose of this legislation was to provide for humane treatment of horses, then they would address the issue of the fate of the thousands of animals this would effect, accumulating exponentially each year.

H.R.503 focuses on what happens after an animal is dead rather than when it is alive. It does not matter to the horse – it is dead. The proponents of the legislation have stated publicly that they do not care if unwanted horses are euthanized, they just care about the disposition of the remains of the unwanted horse.

My concern, as well as the concern of all of the horse lovers who oppose this bill, is what do we do with these horses when they are alive? How are they properly and humanely cared for?

What will happen to the thousands of horses that are shipped to slaughter plants in other countries? Make no mistake about it – this legislation, while intending to prohibit export of U.S. horses to other countries, has no mechanism to cause this to happen. If the bill's goal is to stop export of horses for slaughter, its authors

definitely need to provide some way to make that happen, or we will simply be exporting the issue outside the humane regulation of our government.

These are just a very few of the repercussions that will occur as a result of the passage of this legislation. Time limits today do not allow me to fully outline all of my concerns but let me list a few more as questions that need to be answered. Besides what happens to the hundreds of thousands of horses this legislation would effect, what happens to the people who work at these businesses? How do states and counties that have a statutory obligation to deal with unwanted animals cope with the abandoned horses that will be left on their doorstep as a result of this bill? Since the bill provides no mechanism to ensure horses are not abandoned by owners, who will deal with the abandoned, starving horses whose owners lack the ability to care for them?

The horse sanctuaries and retirement facilities are already inadequate in numbers and ability to take care of the existing unwanted horses that are sent to them. Even the proponents of H.R.503 have been quoted as saying these types of facilities are currently inadequate. Of the horses that go to sanctuaries, who is going to ensure that there is enough space, money, and expertise to properly care for hundreds of thousands of animals that can easily live to 30 years of age? Who is going to pay for that? Who is going to regulate them?

Since the proponents say they would prefer that unwanted horses are euthanized instead of being processed into a useful product, what about disposal of the potentially tens of thousands of extra carcasses per year? Every state and even many counties have different laws relating to the proper disposal of carcasses. Who will pay for that? All states regulate the disposal of animal carcasses. Local governments already grapple with the problem of unwanted dogs and cats and their disposal. Horses are on average fifty times larger animals. There will be tremendous difficulty for many local governments to properly dispose of carcasses of euthanized horses. It will be expensive and will create environmental and wildlife concerns.

Which leads me to the overarching question: Why is Congress rushing to enact legislation that causes many problems and solves none, especially when there is no consensus in the livestock community? Even if the goal of this legislation was desirable, and I do not accept the premise, this is not a bill that will improve the treatment of horses. Too little has been done to deal with the consequences of destroying a legitimate industry by government fiat. If anything, H.R.503 in its current form will lead to more suffering for the horses it purports to help.

This draconian legislation will have far-reaching and significant detrimental effects for both horses, horse owners and the larger agriculture sector.

As Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, it is my responsibility and privilege to thoroughly review and explore all legislation and Federal policies that affect the agriculture community. This legislation is woefully inadequate, emotionally mis-guided, and fails to serve the best interest of the American horse, and horse owner, despite what the proponents would have you to believe. That's why every major horse owner organization in the country has taken a strong stand against H.R.503. Again, thank you for allowing me a chance to testify today and I have additional documents to submit for the record.