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More horses, fewer options spur neglect

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As the economy fell apart last year, the Nebraska Horse Council began receiving more and more phone calls from people worried about neighbors' horses with protruding ribs and hips.

Horse rescue operations in Nebraska heard from landowners who woke up to find extra horses in their pastures.

There was even talk of people turning horses loose to fend for themselves in the forest outside Chadron, Neb.

Then the big one dropped.

Alliance, Neb., rancher Jason Meduna was arrested April 17 after at least 60 dead and almost 200 starving horses were found on his 1,900-acre property. Hungry horses foraging for any available scrap of grass had ravaged his pastures.

Meduna, 42, who ran a mustang rescue ranch widely known in horse rescue circles, now stands charged with one count of felony animal cruelty while authorities continue to investigate.

While Meduna's case may be unique in size, it is similar to horse neglect and abandonment episodes in other parts of Nebraska and across the country. Maryland, Nevada, Wyoming and Texas all have had horse neglect cases.

Most blame the surge in neglect on a sagging economy. But some also point to the closing in 2007 of the last U.S. horse slaughterhouses, removing what they called a viable option for people who couldn't afford to euthanize and dispose of the horses themselves.

"Kill buyers" would purchase old, sick or unwanted horses at auctions for below-market prices that generally just recoup the horse owners' cost of transporting the horse to the auction.

The horses then were sold to the slaughterhouses, where the suitable animals would be turned into meat to feed animals at U.S. zoos or to export to Europe and Japan for human consumption.

Though their business has dwindled, kill buyers still sell an estimated 100,000 horses each year to slaughterhouses in Canada and Mexico. Congress is considering a bill to ban the sale and transport of horses for human consumption outside the country.

Some states have outlawed horse slaughter, too, but Montana, Missouri and North Dakota in the past three months have taken legislative action on the slaughterhouse matter.

North Dakota set aside \$50,000 to study whether horse slaughtering plants are legal in the state. The Montana House passed a bill to support investors in a new horse slaughterhouse. Missouri passed a resolution opposing the congressional bill.

The U.S. Humane Society, which played a major role in shutting down horse slaughterhouses, advocates a birth control vaccine as a humane way to control the country's wild horse population.

The story behind the 3-Strikes Mustang Ranch tragedy has yet to be detailed. In recent months, Meduna had told people that his horses were being poisoned. Such a scenario was disputed by a veterinarian who found sand in at least one horse's feces — a sign that the horse was ingesting sand while scavaging for whatever food it could find.

Mustangs typically are rounded up by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management when the horses overpopulate or are overgrazing public rangelands, mostly in the western United States. The horses are then sold or adopted.

Meduna purchased more than 200 mustangs from the Bureau of Land Management for as little as \$10 per horse, according to a bureau spokeswoman.

Mustangs have the same genetic makeup as domesticated horses but are socialized differently because they grow up in the wild.

Mark Lyon, a Bennington horse trainer who works with three or four mustangs a year, likens it to people: those who are raised in large cities and those who grow up on farms.

"They have different skill sets based on their experiences," Lyon said.

Domesticating the mustangs means acclimating the horses to humans — a process that can take from three weeks to several months. Some horses are never able to be ridden, he said.

"I love horses and I hate to see any of them die," Lyon said. "But I don't know what everybody's going to do with the extra horses."

Horse rescue operations are looked at as an alternative to slaughterhouses. But rescue owners who take unwanted horses for rehabilitation can wind up having too many to care for properly.

"We're all in danger of having that scenario happen to us," said Lin Beaune, who runs a nonprofit horse rescue operation north of Kearney, Neb.

In the past 10 months, Beaune has taken seven horses from an owner who lost his property to foreclosure and five horses from a man selling them to pay legal fees.

A kill buyer sold her the daughter of a Kentucky Derby winner that was set for slaughter.

"This winter, it just went nuts," Beaune said of the number of horses needing rescue.

Each horse costs Beaune \$60 to \$100 per month to feed and provide routine veterinary care. The costs rise significantly when a horse needs emergency medical care.

Lynn Schmale, the owner of a private horse rescue operation in Holt County, and her husband care for 46 horses and two donkeys on their own dime while working 50-hour weeks at other jobs.

She can take a few more, she said, but has turned away horses from people who cannot transport them to her.

"I don't want to get overwhelmed," Schmale said. "That's made others shut down."

When people call the Nebraska Horse Council for advice on what to do with an unwanted horse, information is provided about horse rescue groups and auctions visited by kill buyers. The council doesn't advocate one option over another, said Jamie Sich, the council's president.

Sich's personal view is that slaughterhouses are needed in the United States to handle old, sick and unwanted horses.

After the U.S. slaughterhouses were closed, the demand for horses dropped and unwanted or unusable horses flooded the market.

Because kill buyers set the bottom market prices, the prices for all horses went into free fall. A horse that may have been valuable several years ago is worth half as much today.

Lower demand has left breeders with an unexpected surplus of horses they had hoped to sell but now must raise.

But Beaune said slaughterhouses should not be "dumping grounds for the irresponsible breeders" — those who thought they could make a buck and came up dry.

Some of those horses have ended up in her pasture after being saved by the generosity of the online group Fans of Barbaro.

Beaune acknowledged that she and her husband own about 40 more horses than they should. But these are desperate times — and she knows when to stop.

"I'm not doing any horse any favor to bring it in here and not be able to meet its needs," she said.