

# **Alternatives to Slaughter**

*The Horsemen's Council of Illinois presents a series of articles to explain alternatives to slaughter for horses that have come to the end of their useful lives with their present owners. It is the Council's position that while no horse owner is required to send a horse to slaughter, it is the right and duty of horse owners to make benevolent end-of-life decisions for their unwanted, unusable, unsafe or unsound horses. The Council worked successfully in the last session of the Illinois General Assembly to add language to the Equine Infectious Anemia control act which effectively eliminates the possibility of severely medicated horses from going to slaughter and further requires sellers of equine at auction to sign a written acknowledgment stating that they understand the possibility that the equine they sell may end up going to slaughter.*

---

*Part I of this series is an overview of those options that are available to horse owners in lieu of slaughter.*

*Part II deals with the topic of euthanasia and considerations surrounding this option.*

*Part III deals with equine rescue organizations and retirement homes.*

---

## **Part I**

The question has been asked many times by horse owners, "What are the alternatives to taking my horse to auction and possibly having it end up at slaughter?"

Many horses that end up at the slaughterhouse are those that are no longer able to perform their job. These horses are either lame, permanently debilitated, geriatric, or have serious behavioral problems. Cause these horses cannot be used, and if they cannot be maintained in a humane manner to live out their natural life, the most sensible option is euthanasia. Euthanasia can be performed by many of your local large animal veterinarians. To ensure the safety and comfort of your animal, euthanasia should only be performed by a licensed veterinarian. You need to be aware, however, that euthanasia involves more than just making an appointment with your veterinarian. The veterinarian is only responsible for administering the lethal injection. Arrangements must be made by you for disposal of the body. By law, the body should be removed within 24 hours.

Some horse owners choose to have their horse buried either on their property or at a pet cemetery. Those owners without access to heavy equipment for earthmoving must arrange for someone to come to their property and properly bury their horse. This will involve finding a backhoe service, and making sure that environmental and other conditions allow backhoe access to the area in which you want to bury the horse. This may be problematic during the middle of winter with heavy snows or frozen ground. Burial of a dead animal, especially one the size of a horse, must meet the requirements of the Environmental Protection Act as well as state and local ordinances. Some areas do not allow large animal burial, others have limits on the numbers of large animals that can be buried within a certain area and/or where burial can take place (how far from residences, how far from water sources, etc.).

Those horse owners choosing to bury their horse in a pet cemetery need to arrange to have the body of their horse transported to the burial site. Many pet cemeteries also offer cremation services whereby your horse can be cremated individually and the ashes returned to you or spread upon a chosen site at the cemetery.

Other options that exist to dispose of euthanized horses are composting or rendering. Composting of dead animals must be done within compliance of the Dead Animal Disposal Act. A renderer can also be contacted to come and pick up the body and dispose of it properly. Renderers must be licensed in accordance with the Dead Animal Disposal Act, and they should be able to collect the body within 24 hours.

A few of the horses that end up at slaughter are those that are functional, but their owners are no longer able to care for them. If there is a possibility that a horse can lead a useful life, there are more options for them. These include private sale, public sale with precautions or donation.

Many horses are sold privately directly to other parties – in other words, they are not consigned to auctions. This will not guarantee that the horse will not end up at the slaughterhouse, but it minimizes the chances, particularly if you can demand a price for the horse that exceeds that paid by the slaughterhouse. Many horses that are past their prime but are still serviceable in a limited capacity can make great kid or lesson horses. Finding the right potential owner for your horse can present a challenge, and requires an investment of time and sometimes money.

Demanding a minimum price (called setting a reserve) on a horse that you consign to public auction can also be a way to sell the horse and avoid the chance of it falling into the hands of a slaughter buyer. Of course, you may run the risk of the horse not making the minimum reserve bid, and be forced to take the unsold horse back home.

Serviceable horses also may be donated to not-for-profit groups. Not-for-profit groups can include educational facilities and some church-associated groups or camps, boys-and girls-clubs, therapeutic riding programs and even mounted police academies. Donated horses are used most often for teaching and research purposes, though some may be incorporated into a riding or lesson program. Make sure that you clearly understand the intended use for your horse upon donation and check on the type of care the donated animals receive. For example, horses donated to a College of Veterinary Medicine may be used for instructional purposes and euthanized following their use. Other institutions may take the horse with the intent of selling it to raise funds for the organization. It is also important that you be absolutely candid about your horse within these institutions. You would not want to send a horse with a behavior problem to a therapeutic riding academy, for example. The donation option also comes with the benefit of a tax deduction for the horse owner, to the extent allowable by law. Of course, not every horse will be accepted by a not-for-profit institution. Facilities' size, as well as other factors, play a role in how many horses an institution will be able to support.

Some of these otherwise serviceable horses may qualify to be donated to a horse rescue facility. Horse rescue facilities are generally different from horse humane associations. Rescue facilities take in otherwise healthy horses and rehab or retrain them and then place them in new homes. Horse humane groups take abused and neglected horses, and can hopefully restore them to health and place them in another home. If choosing to donate to a rescue facility, the facility should be thoroughly investigated to ensure that it is a reputable operation. In most states, horse rescue operations are not licensed and do not need to adhere to any state-mandated rules for care and disposition of donated animals. Many specific rules exist at most of these

rescue organizations regarding the type of horse that may be donated. For example, rescues exist for certain breeds of horses, including Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds.

Several options are available to horse owners who choose not to take their horse to a public auction and risk the possibility that the horse might be consigned to slaughter. Both time and thought need to be put into which option is best for you and your horse. This is the time to be realistic about your horse and how it fits into the horse industry. Part II of this series will take a more in-depth look at these options, including the pros and cons of each, and financial obligations.

## **Part II**

When a horse is no longer serviceable, and therefore of no intrinsic value to the horse industry, or if the horse is aged or infirmed to the point where quality of life is poor, it is the horse owner's solemn responsibility to decide how to dispose of the animal. Euthanasia is the most widely available and frequently utilized option to deal with unhealthy or unwanted horses.

There are many euphemisms for euthanasia, and several different methods are approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) to accomplish it, but plainly stated, euthanasia is the delivery of a swift and painless end to life.

### ***How are horses euthanized?***

Although the exact method may be dictated by individual circumstances, the most common form of euthanasia is injecting an overdose of sodium pentobarbital, a barbiturate. Ending a horse's life is never an easy undertaking, and the use of chemical euthanasia, although it has become the most widely accepted method of performing this task, is not without its drawbacks. Owners arranging for the euthanization of their horse should understand the process and be mentally and physically prepared for the procedure as well as its aftermath.

Euthanasia prices vary depending on the service you ask your veterinarian to perform and your locale. For example, if the horse is to be put down on the owner's property, expect to pay for a veterinary out-call as well as charges for the procedure. Charges also will vary by practitioner and area, and according to whether the horse is pre-medicated prior to administration of the sodium pentobarbital. Charges start at \$50 and can exceed \$400 in some cases.

### ***After euthanasia what – rendering, cremation, burial?***

When the horse is euthanized on the farm, disposal of the body is the owner's responsibility. Illinois regulations require that this be accomplished within 24 hours of death, and that adequate measures are taken in the interim to avoid the carcass being scavenged by local animals or wildlife. Dogs and other animals have died from ingestion of the euthanizing chemicals residing in the bodies of large animals such as horses.

There are three methods allowed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for disposal of bodies as large as horses – rendering, cremation and burial. Rendering is a service wherein the body is reduced to useable by-products, such as meat, bone and blood meal, fats, oils and collagen, and hair and hide products. The accessibility of services and the future policies of rendering chemically euthanized horses are not promising.

Very few rendering services in the United States accept horse carcasses. According to the National Renderer's Association, there are only about 350 total renderers in the U.S. Approximately 100 of these renderers are attached directly to meat packers and do not accept outside carcasses. Nor do more than half of the 250 or so renderers left (most collect meat scraps and kitchen grease from restaurants and other human food preparation sites). In the state of Illinois, there are only three rendering services that accept horse carcasses. They are Darling International, Inc. in National Stockyards, IL (618) 271-8190, Millstadt Rendering in Belleville, IL (618) 538-5312 and National By-Products in Mason City, IL (217) 482-3261.

Some rendering companies offer pick-up services, but many have restricted ranges and somewhat erratic schedules. For example, National By-Products offers carcass pickup within a 120-mile radius of Mason City, so its services are restricted to the middle portion of the state, although they do have some collection around the Rockford area through trucking transfer services. The cost for rendering services can vary from \$40 - \$400, depending on your location and the type of service required.

***Why arrange for transporting the carcass before euthanizing your horse?***

The take-home message here is to make sure that you arrange for rendering plant pickup in advance to ensure timely removal of the body from your premises. At the time of this writing, no carcass pickup services or rendering plants could be located that specifically service the northern sections of Illinois. This presents a real problem for a large number of horse facilities in the northern portion of the state. Unfortunately, this realization might not come to mind until *after* a horse owner is faced with disposing of the dead horse.

***Could euthanizing chemicals flaw rendered products (animal feed)?***

During the rendering process, whole animal carcasses are ground and processed into what is called 'protein blend' that eventually makes its way into animal food. Regulations governing the testing of the protein blend for drug, chemical and biological residues are not very specific. For example, there are no regulations governing the permissible levels of pentobarbital in rendered protein products. If done at all, testing for drug and other chemical residues in protein blend products is largely performed by the end user. Some of the premium pet food companies do some of this testing on a voluntary basis, but the FDA does not regulate residue levels of pentobarbital in particular.

All Illinois renderers stated that they presently collect very few horse carcasses. This means that at the present time so few horse carcasses make their way into rendered protein product that dilution by other animals and products makes pentobarbital residues contributed by chemically euthanized horses very low.

A recent investigation done through the FDA Center of Veterinary Medicine tested for pentobarbital residues in commercial dry dog foods and did detect pentobarbital residues in several products, but in relatively low concentration (a full text of their report can be found at: [www.fda.gov/cvm/efoi/DFreport.htm](http://www.fda.gov/cvm/efoi/DFreport.htm)). It was concluded that the concentrations of pentobarbital detected in the study are unlikely to cause any deleterious effects in dogs. However, if the number of euthanized horses making their way through the rendering process increases in the future, these barbiturate residues in finished products will likely increase. Should this occur, and should it trigger a reaction by pet owners concerning the safety of their animals' food, a likely result will be that

renderers will reject horses euthanized by chemical means. This could further limit the carcass disposal options for horse owners in the future. (Note: Euthanasia by gunshot or captive bolt, recognized as instantaneous and humane by the AVMA and used in U.S. slaughter plants, keeps euthanizing chemicals out of horses dispatched in this manner, meaning that no potentially lethal pentobarbital would enter the food chain from these horses.)

If burial is allowed in your area, you must comply with the regulations of the Illinois Disposal of Dead Animals Act - 225 ILCS 610 ([www.ilga.gov/commission/icar/admincode/008/00800090sections.html](http://www.ilga.gov/commission/icar/admincode/008/00800090sections.html)) regarding depth of burial, maximum number of animals allowed to be buried in a single site, and how far the burial site must be located from residential areas, water sources, and other areas of potential environmental contamination. For example, Illinois law requires that burial must be a least 200 – 400 feet from a stream, private potable water source, or any other potable water supply source. Dead animals cannot be buried less than 200 feet from an existing residence not owned or occupied by the owner of the animal. Burial depth should be sufficient as to provide at least six inches of compacted soil cover and precautions should be taken to minimize erosion and disturbance by animal or mechanical means. The abdominal cavity should be punctured to allow the escape of putrefactive gasses.

#### ***How much ground is required to bury a horse?***

In order to be in compliance with Illinois regulations for burying an animal as large as a horse, you need access to a significant area of ground, and relatively few horses can be buried legally on a typical farm. For example, requirements for burial of an average 1,000-pound horse dictates a burial site of 1,000 square feet, or approximately a 32'x32' piece of land. In this area, you can bury no more than three horses total, and you cannot bury a horse on this site more frequently than once every two years. If your farm is large and you have a significant number of horses to bury over the course of several years, you cannot simply bury additional horses at 32-foot distances from the original burial site because no more than three sites can be located within a 120-foot radius of the first. All horse burial sites should be marked in some manner, because regulations require that burial sites must be made available for state inspection.

While many veterinary professionals and environmentalists have voiced concern, thorough studies of the environmental contamination potential of the actual euthanizing chemicals used on buried animals have not been performed. If this concern is acted upon, it is possible that burial regulations may become significantly more restrictive in the future.

If a horse owner does not own large earth moving equipment, he or she must locate the services of a backhoe. Your local construction company may rent a backhoe and operator by the hour, but these services may be difficult to schedule during the peak construction season. Environmental conditions may prevent or at least greatly complicate burial in some areas. Consider, for example, the complications of frozen ground in northern locales during the winter, or saturated ground creating a standing water problem during an extremely rainy season.

If burial at home is not an option, burial at a dedicated animal cemetery may be available. Pet cemeteries large enough to accommodate horses are more difficult to locate compared to those for house pets. The International Association of Pet Cemeteries may be helpful in locating a memorial garden for horses near you

([www.iaopc.com](http://www.iaopc.com)). Transportation of the body to the cemetery may be an additional problem, but some pet cemeteries offer transportation services (at extra cost). Costs for burial of your horse at a memorial garden can range from \$500 - \$1,000 or more.

### ***Why not composting or cremation?***

Composting of animal carcasses, other than horses, is allowable within strict guidelines spelled out by the Disposal of Dead Animals Act. Regulations for the composting of horses have not been included in the Act, therefore, for practical purposes, horse carcass composting is not allowed in Illinois.

Some informational websites state that some landfills will accept animal carcasses. Although this may be true in Illinois for the bodies of small animals like dogs and cats, the widespread availability of landfills for the disposal of bodies of animals as large as horses is doubtful.

Cremation is a service that may be provided off-site. Use of an enclosed incinerator that complies with the Illinois EPA regulations is required. Neither open burning nor mass burial of horse carcasses on the farm is allowed in Illinois. Mass cremation may be performed at larger equine hospitals or colleges of veterinary medicine (the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign does *not* currently provide this service). Mass or individual cremation also may be available from animal crematoriums or pet cemeteries. There are a few animal crematoriums that will provide transportation for the deceased for an additional charge. If you wish to have your horse put down at home, transporting the body to the crematorium will be your responsibility. The International Association of Pet Cemeteries ([www.iaopc.com](http://www.iaopc.com)) can provide a list of crematoriums available in your area. Cremation of your horse generally will cost \$600 to \$3,700. Many crematoriums can arrange for the ashes to be returned to you, or they can be spread upon a chosen site at a pet cemetery.

Euthanasia may be the most popular choice for dealing with the problem of unwanted, unusable or unhealthy horses, but it is not a simple one. It requires careful planning, and the details can be disturbing to some, and difficult to deal with for a bereaved horse owner. The expenses involved with euthanasia and disposal of the body following it can be significant. In the end, the responsibility falls to each individual horse owner to provide for his or her horses during life and at the end of life. Careful consideration of the options available should be made in order to choose the one that best serves you and your horse.

## **Part III**

Unwanted horses come from many different circumstances. Children grow up and move away from home and may no longer have an interest in their childhood companion, or may lack the resources to take it with them. Parents with newfound freedoms may be unwilling to take care of a child's horse. Some horse owners fall into financial trouble and can no longer afford the upkeep of a horse. Horses grow old and owners may decide that they cannot give the care that is needed to their geriatric dependant. Race horses and other performance horses come to the end of their competitive careers and may no longer be of value to their owners. In a perfect world, every unwanted horse would be able to find its way to a new owner who would care for it adequately until its natural demise. Unfortunately, we live in an imperfect world and unwanted horses present a

difficult dilemma – a large animal requiring significant expense to maintain that can be expected to live for 25 years. Public resources for the care of unwanted horses throughout their natural life-span are extremely limited.

What are the options for these unwanted horses? Part II of this series discussed euthanasia and the facts surrounding it. Although to some euthanasia may seem an extreme alternative, it is certainly preferable to a life, possibly decades long, of neglect. Other options may exist for some horses looking for new living situations. One option is placement at specialized facilities designed for your particular type of horse. These horse-care facilities can fall into four basic categories: Rescue, Rehabilitation, Retirement, and Education/Charitable.

Rescue facilities are generally 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations that take in severely abused or neglected horses. Horse rescue organizations generally work with local humane societies and law enforcement to confiscate horses that are being neglected or abused. Many of these organizations exist all over the United States and are privately run and supported through charitable donations. No centralized organization exists for this type of facility, so it is unknown exactly how many exist in the U.S., but it is safe to say that at the present moment, unfortunately, demand exceeds supply. According to Donna Ewing, president of the Hooved Animal Rescue and Protection Society ([www.harponline.org](http://www.harponline.org)), all horse rescue facilities in the state of Illinois presently are full. The level of care and types of animals accepted by rescue agencies across the country will vary considerably. After rescue, horses are restored to health and generally put up for adoption.

Rehabilitation facilities are devoted to changing the life circumstances of usable horses, thereby giving them a new occupation and added value. Rescue facilities often have a rehabilitation function also, but not always. Rehabilitation facilities can exist to service horses that have not been abused or neglected. Rehabilitation organizations exist for a number of specific horse breeds. One of the higher-profile rehabilitation organizations is the Communication Alliance to Network Thoroughbred Ex-Race horses (CANTER; [www.canterusa.org](http://www.canterusa.org)), a non-profit organization that takes retired Thoroughbred race horses and places them in non-racing homes. In like manner, the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF, [www.trfinc.org](http://www.trfinc.org)) works with the National Thoroughbred Racing Association to place ex-race horses.

The Standardbred Retirement Foundation ([www.adoptahorse.org](http://www.adoptahorse.org)) finds homes for former harness race horses, and other horse breed groups also offer breed-specific rehabilitation and adoption organizations. Horse rehab and adoption organizations often require the horse owner to fill out an application and be approved before they will accept a horse.

Retirement facilities offer a place for the geriatric horse to live out the rest of its days. These facilities vary widely in size and can support from just a few horses to 100 horses. Although retirement facilities specialize in geriatric horses, not all old horses qualify. Retirement farms generally accept only those horses that are in reasonably good health and will not require extreme veterinary care.

Most retirement homes are not free. Many require a one-time donation at the time of horse placement to help cover their costs of operation. As an example, Ryerss Farm in

Coventry, PA ([www.Ryerss.org](http://www.Ryerss.org)) requires a one-time donation fee of at least \$4,000 and the owner must sign over all rights to the horse.

Horses also are required to have a current veterinary inspection, negative Coggins test within one year, deworming within 30 days, all shoes removed and feet trimmed, and teeth floated if necessary.

Horses must also be at least 20 years of age. Other retirement facilities may allow the owner to retain ownership of the horse. These facilities may require monthly or yearly boarding fees. Horse owners seeking a retirement facility for their aged equine should make sure it is the best choice for their particular horse. Retirement facilities are usually based on lots of pasture turnout and herd socialization. If your horse does not do well in these situations, this may not be the right choice for your horse. Horse owners would be well warned to prepare for this option earlier in their older horse's life. Many of the best retirement facilities have waiting lists and it could take years for a spot to open.

For some horses with the right attributes, donation to a non-profit educational, charitable or public service organization might be a good fit. Such organizations include colleges with riding, breeding, teaching or research activities, or handicapped riding facilities, not-for-profit horse camps, and even mounted police academies. In Illinois, for example, the state's collegiate Equine Science Program at Southern Illinois University Carbondale accepts horse donations ([www.siu.edu/departments/coagr/animal/equine/donations](http://www.siu.edu/departments/coagr/animal/equine/donations)).

The Salem Children's Home is a non-profit child welfare agency in Illinois that accepts Arabians and half-Arabians into its ranch program ([www.salemranch.com/horseprogram](http://www.salemranch.com/horseprogram)). For information about horses to donate for handicapped riding programs, contact the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association ([www.narha.org](http://www.narha.org)). Although few in number, Mounted Police units are always looking for a few good horses ([www.mountedpolice.com/donation](http://www.mountedpolice.com/donation)). The Certified Horsemanship Association ([www.cha-ahse.org](http://www.cha-ahse.org)) may be able to help you with locating horse camps that accept donated horses. Before donation, the horse owner should thoroughly investigate the potential adoptive organization and learn all about their needs, policies and potential use of the horse. Be honest with the organization about the nature of your horse to ensure a good match.

No matter which of the above options are chosen, responsible horse owners must do their homework before giving up ownership of their horses. Most rescue, rehabilitation, retirement and other facilities do a great job and fill a real need in the horse industry. Unfortunately, some disreputable people and scams exist in horse adoptions.

Also, otherwise well-meaning would-be rescuers can get in over their heads, with sad consequences to the horses in their care. Presently, no laws exist to regulate most of these types of horse facilities. Ultimately, it is up to the horse owner to make sure the facility they choose is reputable and well-run. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) has produced helpful guidelines for horse adoptive facilities ([http://www.aaep.org/pdfs/rescue\\_retirement\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.aaep.org/pdfs/rescue_retirement_guidelines.pdf)), but these are at present only recommendations. Facilities should have a regular deworming and vaccination program, regular farrier visits, and annual dental checkups, which are especially important for the geriatric horse. The AAEP also suggests fresh forage (pasture) with grain supplementation only if needed. Good quality pasture should meet all of a horse's basic requirements. Horses should have access to water at all times. Shelter and

fencing should also be inspected at a prospective facility. Horses should have adequate shelter while on pasture and stalls should be available for sick or injured horses. Stalls should be big enough to allow a horse to get up and down comfortably and have sufficient ventilation. They should be well-bedded and cleaned at least once every 24 hours. Pasture fencing should be well-maintained and suitable for horses. Pastures should be free of machinery and refuse. The rescue, rehab, retirement and other adoptive homes guidelines produced by the AAEP contains a checklist for assessing these types of facilities.

A horse owner contemplating donation should use this checklist to inspect potential adoptive facilities. If you decide to relinquish your ownership rights, as required by most facilities, there may come a time when your horse needs to be euthanized. Talk with the facilities veterinarian to ensure that your horse will get proper care in this situation.

There are options for horses who have reached the end of their time, either in life or with their present owner. Hopefully, the variety and availability of these alternatives will increase in the future. As with all aspects of responsible care for our horses, however, it is ultimately the owner's right and obligation to choose the option that is best for them and for their horse. In making that choice, be honest with potential owners/caretakers, be honest with yourself, and most of all, be honest with your horse.

---

*"Alternatives to Slaughter" is authored by Bonnie A. Mullinex, a graduate student at Southern Illinois University in the equine reproduction program. Bonnie works under the direction of Sheryl S. King, Ph.D., Director of Equine Studies, Animal Science Department, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL. Bonnie received her Bachelor's Degree (cum laude) in biology from St. Mary of the Woods College in Indiana. Bonnie has been riding since age two and enjoys gentling horses and showing hunter under saddle and Western pleasure. She was a 4-H member for 11 years and currently is superintendent of the Edgar County (IL) 4-H and youth horse shows program.*