

Expanding the Effort

ALLEN WARREN

I believe that, in their hearts, every true horseman would like to see the perceived need for equine slaughter eliminated, even those who support it as the only practical way to deal with “unwanted” horses in America. Now, a unique opportunity to do just this has presented itself thanks to an unparalleled expansion of the country’s equine rescue and sanctuary resources to save horses displaced due to the economy.

At the same time, it appears the recession has chased many of the marginal commercial and backyard breeders—major sources of the excess horse problem—out of business, and countless owners that could barely afford their horses have had to give them up. Already the number of horses being slaughtered in Canada and Mexico is shrinking. One report from the Equine Welfare Alliance puts the total for both countries at the end of August 2010 right at 75,000—the lowest in many years.

Horses displaced by the economy over the past few years have forced equine rescue operators such as myself to not only expand our sanctuary capacities but also to find new ways to save many more horses than we have in the past.

Sponsored foster homes and new programs such as in-place rescues to help owners keep and support their horses with feed banks and other financial assistance have vastly expanded our capacity to improve horse welfare. For instance, the Oregon hay bank program alone (which provides owners with enough hay to keep their horses healthy during times of crisis), created and operated by horse rescuers, has kept almost 800 horses in their homes since 2009, and similar efforts are under way in other states.

According to Shirley Puga, founder of



The equine rescue community could be the answer to the excess horse problem.

the National Equine Resource Network (NERN), a program that hopes to find financial assistance for 501(c)(3) nonprofit equine welfare organizations, there currently are 500-600 equine rescues, both nonprofit and private, in the United States and countless individuals who take in rescued horses. A NERN survey found that the average sanctuary capacity is more than double that indicated by a recent University of California, Davis, study of a much smaller number of sanctuaries. The survey, which was sent to 498 nonprofit and private rescues and garnered 266 responses, also revealed that almost 20% of these sanctuaries operate local feeding assistance programs in their communities.

The bottom line: America’s equine rescue resource is much greater than previously reported and is capable of doing vastly more if supported by both the commercial equine industry and private horse owners. The equine rescue community could be the answer to the “unwanted horse problem” if

given the chance and provided the resources. With the new programs described above and selected expansion of actual sanctuary capacity I believe we can reduce the number of displaced horses in this country annually to one that is manageable without the need for equine slaughter.

The new Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (the only globally recognized organization providing standards for identifying legitimate animal sanctuaries) equine sanctuary verification and accreditation program gives us the means to identify and support legitimate equine rescues around the country. With the help of NERN, a delivery system to distribute funding can be put in place quickly.

Paying for this becomes the question, of course. Since all breed registries and owner organizations are committed to the welfare of their horses, let them simply add \$25 to every registration fee dedicated specifically to rehoming and long-term care of horses in need. The five largest registries alone add almost 300,000 horses annually; that’s \$6,000,000 a year.

Distribute this money to 250 qualified equine sanctuaries annually and we’ll show you how fast the number of excess horses each year can be reduced.

I hope I have planted a seed here that can germinate and grow among horsemen everywhere. The equine rescue community is more than ready to join with breeders and owners to give thousands of horses each year the chance at life they earn through their labor and so richly deserve. h

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allen Warren has been rescuing horses since 1994 at his Horse Harbor Foundation near Poulsbo, Wash., one of six equine rescue sanctuaries to be accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries to date.

This opinion column is for topics of importance to the horse industry. If there is a topic you want covered, or if you'd like to submit an article for possible inclusion, contact Stephanie L. Church, Editor-in-Chief, The Horse, PO Box 919003, Lexington, KY 40591-9003; schurch@TheHorse.com.