

Horse Abuse in Utah By Cheryl Smith

Does it exist, in this land of happiness and plenty? In a state where there are more horses than in all other state but one? Utah may not have slaughterhouses that kill horses, but horses are being overbred, neglected, left to stand in summer sun and winter blizzards without shelter, starved and neglected to death in our state, and sold and resold throughout their lifetimes. And then there are the more egregious cases of people intentionally mutilating and torturing horses. Utahns clearly have a love affair with horses. Yet laws to protect these majestic companion animals are basically non-existent, because the Utah Legislature exempts them as “animals used for agricultural purposes.” Instead of living, sentient beings capable of much suffering, the Legislature sees them as mere machines.

That’s why Wasatch Humane launched a horse-rescue and education program a little over a year ago.

What is horse abuse? Here are just some examples of what reasonable people know to be abusive, but that are commonplace and perfectly legal in our state, because Utah law (Code 76-9-301) doesn’t even require food, veterinary care, or shelter for “animals kept for agricultural purposes”, ever since 1996. That’s when Wasatch Humane led the successful effort to upgrade Utah’s animal cruelty code, but the Legislature immediately introduced a compromise to exempt livestock.

Clearly what the Legislature views as acceptable treatment of animals is out of step with public sentiment, as judged by the numerous calls we and other agencies get every week from citizens concerned for horses they see without food, water, and shelter. In just the last two weeks, our small organization has received complaints of neglected horses from Layton, to Farmington, to Herriman, to Mount Pleasant.

Here are some commonly seen examples of what reasonable people define as abuse of horses, but that is legal under Utah laws...or the lack of them:

- Penning horses in dry lots, without offering daily feed and supplements.
- Horses in corrals or pastures without shade from the summer sun and winter cold.
- Horses without water
- Not providing veterinary care
- Horses penned in small corrals or makeshift pens without exercise.
- Excessive and forceful training methods
- Long hooves that cause lameness and other skeletal problems and diseases.
- Soring: the practice of mutilating the feet of gaited horses, to accentuate their gait.
- Horses in feed lots: again, they can’t be slaughtered here in our state, but sources inform us that many horses from throughout the West are routinely temporarily held in Utah feed lots, on their way to slaughterhouses in Texas and Canada.
- Unwanted horses (some loved and well-cared for, but unwanted nonetheless) taken to weekly public auctions, where as many as half are sold to meat buyers who truck them without water or rest breaks to slaughterhouses in Texas and Canada.
- Breeding horses with no regard to soundness or temperament, just to make a buck,

flooding the market with cheap horses that are destined to be sold and resold many times throughout their lifetime.

Two months ago I confronted one cowboy who was selling a mustang at auction, something we discovered is commonly done by people who adopt mustangs from the Bureau of Land Management, after the one-year wait for the ownership title, even though they aren't supposed to. "Why are you selling such a young, nice, sound horse?" I asked. He replied "I have too many horses, but I want to keep my brood mares for breeding and selling, so I get rid of the geldings."

"We don't need more horses being bred in our state," I said coldly, to which the cowboy agreed "yeah, there are too many horses in Utah; that's why we need a slaughterhouse here." Wasatch Humane was the only party to bid on the four-year-old buckskin, preventing him from ending up on the meat buyer's truck with several others that day. After several weeks of learning Parelli Natural Horsemanship's Seven Games, the little horse named Durango was adopted to a wonderfully kind woman who has since been told by several horse experts "you are so lucky to have such a nice horse, he's one of those horses you only get once in a lifetime." Durango and Terry will live happily ever after.

What can each of us do to improve the laws to help Utah's horses? Watch Wasatch Humane's website and get on our mailing list to stay updated on possible new legislation to be introduced to strengthen and improve the laws and penalties. Contact your state representative and senator to let them know that protecting horses from such commonplace abuse is important to you and should be important to all reasonable members of our society who perhaps aren't extreme animal-rights activists, but who nevertheless recognize mistreatment and neglect when they see it and want a kinder, more humane community. Donate to Wasatch Humane's Horse Rescue and Adoption Program. And consider opening your heart and barn to temporarily foster a horse for us while it awaits adoption. Lastly, be grateful for and honor your commitment to your own horses who share your life, especially if you're the one who bred them into this world that is already overpopulated with unwanted, neglected, and loved-but-inconvenient or too-expensive-to-have horses. Don't breed more! If you're doing it humanely and correctly, with all of the care and expenses involved, you will not make money, but only add to the suffering of others for which there aren't enough qualified homes. Before deciding to sell or give away a horse because it is inconvenient or doesn't do something for you (jump high enough, run fast enough, or look pretty enough), realize the long-term commitment in owning a horse, that could live 35 years. Horses are not machines or tools or lawn ornaments. They are living, breathing animals that form fierce emotional bonds with their human counterparts and herd mates, capable of feeling joy, comfort, pain, loneliness, and fear.

Knowing that, and being the "superior" species who controls all aspects of keeping and owning and raising them, aren't we obligated to at least have laws to punish those who would not treat them humanely and indeed not even provide the basics?

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