

WESTERN JUSTICE

Legislative  Fund

July 14, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Save America's Forgotten Equines Act – (SAFE Act) slated to be included in this year's Farm Bill

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, and Ranking Member Boozman,

Western Justice is the largest membership-based organization representing equine organizations, horse enthusiasts, horse breeders, horse trainers, horse owners, equestrian exhibitors, equestrian event producers, livestock producers, and ranchers across the country. Our organization works to protect the welfare of horses, horse ownership, and to protect and promote the continuation of the western horse industry. Because of our commitment to horses in America and the horse industry, we ask that you bring your attention to the SAFE Act and consider our position in opposition.

Our members, as well as other partner organizations, have grave concerns that the SAFE Act becoming law will create an animal welfare crisis, placing tens of thousands of horses in danger of neglect, abandonment, and ultimately starvation. Despite the name of the SAFE Act, equines are not forgotten in America. The horse industry contributes \$122 billion in revenues to the American economy on an annual basis.

Horses are very large animals and when they die, or when humane euthanasia is warranted, handling their remains is a challenge. There must be a system in place that offers affordable, responsible, management options and a humane end-of-life for horses. The SAFE Act is incompatible with professional opinions of animal welfare experts and with the responsibility we have to our horses in America. Instead, the SAFE Act exchanges science and facts for prohibitions based solely on emotion.

Processing horses is legal in America and is a humane practice in countries all over the world. However, processing horses in the United States is no longer in practice due to the removal of appropriations for USDA inspectors for horse processing facilities. This action created a prohibition on processing in the United States, but it did not make it illegal, nor did it change the opinion of the largest group of veterinarians whose practice focuses solely on horses, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, and other organizations regarding the necessity for humane equine processing options.

Western Justice Legislative Fund is a collaborating voice empowering the future of the Western Horse Industry. We are committed to upholding the rights and liberties of breeders, owners, trainers, and exhibitors while ensuring the welfare of livestock and our way of life.

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The prohibition of USDA inspectors and the subsequent ban has not removed processing as an option for unwanted horses. Instead, it has prohibited USDA inspectors from animal welfare oversight of horses being shipped to Canada and Mexico for processing. We firmly believe it is our duty as American horse lovers and owners, to oversee the welfare of our horses, including their humane euthanasia and dispatching of their remains.

It is foolish to believe that elimination of humane euthanasia options will magically erase the need for such assistance in managing unwanted horses. Elimination of practical and humane euthanasia practices will not stop horses from aging and dying or becoming a liability either financially or otherwise. Despite this common-sense fact, activists will have lawmakers believe that the de facto banning of horse processing in the United States has eliminated the practice altogether. Horses are still being processed, just not on American soil under the watchful eye of the USDA to ensure animal welfare standards are met.

Activist groups are purposely misleading lawmakers about horse processing by making false claims that shipping horses across the American border for processing has greatly reduced. This is simply not the case. Every year tens of thousands of horses are being shipped to Canada and Mexico for processing where it is common practice. The statistics that the USDA currently have available are not accurate. The reality is that the true numbers are not known because in 2018, the USDA shut down the equine transport division of APHIS. Horses, at the present time are being shipped across the Mexican border with no headcount, paperwork check, or any other accountability.

In 2011, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) submitted a report that documented abuse, abandonment, and neglect of horses. The report found that since 2007, the welfare of horses has declined in America. Logic suggests that the de facto ban on humane processing in the United States has led to a decline in equine welfare with more cases of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. This is most certainly not an improvement in welfare as proponents of the SAFE Act are attempting to make lawmakers believe.

Just like our domestic horses, horses on American rangelands, managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM), have not been forgotten either. Unfortunately, these horses have become the center of unnecessary, inhumane, and emotional controversy. Currently, there is an ongoing ecosystem disaster and an animal welfare crisis on our American rangelands due to the continued escalation of population numbers of rangeland horses. Because of the activities of special interest groups focusing solely on emotion, our government agencies, despite their best efforts, are unable to responsibly manage rangeland resources.

The SAFE Act will have a detrimental impact on government agencies' ability to manage ecosystems and the health and welfare of rangeland horses because it will become an underground way to nullify the humane processing of horses and burros as outlined in the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. According to 16 U.S.C.– 1333 (b) (2) (C) and 16 U.S.C. – 1331 (e) (2) et seq. , the Wild and Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, empowers the agencies to use the humane slaughter of equids as a tool for population management. It also allows for the sale of excess wild equids for the

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ultimate purpose of use in products. It is to the detriment of animal welfare and rangelands ecosystems that provisions in appropriations bills have stopped legal authority and are now prohibiting the sale of rangeland horses for processing.

The SAFE Act would also step on the sovereignty of tribal lands and tribal members and will be disproportionality detrimental to many western Indian reservations. The SAFE Act would make it a crime for tribal members or tribal governments to transport a horse to a processing facility even if the facility is in another country. Across the West, tribal lands are severely impacted by the overpopulation of rangeland horses. These horses are impacting their homelands and are severely damaging to their ecology and natural resources.

According to information presented by the National Tribal Horse Coalition (NTHC), an entity consisting of federally recognized tribes whose lands are being damaged by excess numbers of feral horses and a group that works closely with the Intertribal Agriculture Council, "...vast swaths of tribal lands have been totally denuded of any vegetation by rangeland horses. This vegetation includes traditional medicinal plants long used by Indian people as well as vegetation needed by native species such as pronghorns and sage grouse." Damage to fish habitats and agricultural endeavors have also been chronicled by member tribes of the NTHC.

A letter submitted by NTHC Board Members from the Northern Arapaho, Yakama Nation, and Blackfoot Nation, regarding the SAFE Act stated:

"The following observation was recently submitted to the NTHC by a biologist stationed at the Yakama Nation, "On the Reservation, degraded habitat has led to serious declines in ecosystem function, including impacts to microorganisms, reptiles and amphibians, fish (including ESA listed mid-Columbia steelhead), songbirds and raptors, small mammals, carnivores, and a host of other plants and animals. The plants include forage plants and several important Yakama foods and medicines. The opening up of the landscape to the invasion of exotic plant species may forever change these ecosystems without aggressive intervention from resource managers. The extremely high numbers of horses also appear to be forcing deer, which are the most historically important Yakama big game animal, out of highly suitable habitat within the shrub-steppe zone's riparian canyon lands. Many Yakamas complain that these once highly productive hunting areas are now virtually unoccupied by deer."

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And,

“Indian people have been living with horses for hundreds of years and many Indian people own horses and admire them but a domestically owned horse, kept in a fenced pasture, is entirely different than large herds of feral horses. Indian tribes were forced to cede millions of acres of our aboriginal lands in return for greatly reduced reservation lands. If the SAFE Act were to ever become law and we could not reduce the numbers of feral horses, tens of thousands of acres of lands that we did retain would be damaged, all at the behest of perhaps well-meaning but clueless animal rights groups, 99% of whose members have never set foot on an Indian reservation. This is a significant intrusion into the sovereign governing authority that tribes retain. These large herds simply must be culled.”

The American Veterinary Medical Association upholds the processing of horses because it is practical, humane, and helps to guarantee horses will not be subjected to abuse from neglect and starvation.

We urge you to consider opposing the SAFE Act and therefore also opposing the removal of common-sense animal husbandry and animal welfare decisions from true subject matter experts, horse owners and veterinarians.

Sincerely,

Western Justice Legislative Fund Membership

The Cavalry Group

Cc:

The Honorable Brian Schatz
Chairman
Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Vice Chairman
Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

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