Tiny Community Welcomes Horse Slaughterhouse

the Associated Press

ROCKVILLE, Mo. (AP) — A horse slaughtering plant rejected by one Missouri community has been embraced by another whose economy was devastated when a beef-packing plant closed more than a year ago.

Residents of tiny Rockville expressed delight that their community about 100 miles south of Kansas City could soon be home to the first slaughterhouse for horses to operate in the U.S. since 2007.

"The town is all for it," Rockville Mayor Dave Moore told The Kansas City Star (http://bit.ly/Ns73Oq [1]). "I think it's great."

Nearly half of the town's 150 residents packed a City Council meeting Wednesday in support of the proposed plant and the more than 50 jobs it could bring.

The beef packing plant had been by far Rockville's biggest employer, providing more than 70 jobs. Its workers, whether they lived in Rockville or nearby, spent their paychecks there, at the bank, tire shop and bar.

Horse slaughter has effectively been blocked since Congress withheld funds for USDA inspections of horse meat plants in 2006. But a recently passed agriculture bill provides the money.

United Equine, headed by Wyoming state lawmaker Sue Wallis, has applied for federal inspections and plans to buy and retrofit the Rockville plant to handle horses. Wallis said she thinks her company's purchase of the plant is all but certain, and the horse slaughterhouse is expected to open by September.

United Equine approached Mountain Grove in March to see if there was interest in opening the slaughterhouse there, but the company's overtures were bitterly rejected by residents who said they weren't willing to be known as a center for killing horses.

Others, in Missouri and across the country, also oppose the plant because they believe horses shouldn't end up on a dinner table. Most of the meat would likely be sold overseas where there is more of a market for it.

The Humane Society of the United States and others have pushed for legislation banning the slaughter of horses in the U.S. and their export for human consumption.

Humane Society member Joe Maxwell, who raises pigs in Missouri, said he was surprised United Equine would invest in a slaughterhouse with the legislation pending. He said horses are not fit or safe for eating because the medications they

receive aren't generally regulated with meat production in mind.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals opposes the killing of horses — and all animals, in general — and opposes the resumption of horse slaughter. Still, PETA spokeswoman Lindsay Rajt said closing slaughterhouses in the U.S. didn't help horses because the same number continued to be killed after being shipped to Mexico and Canada.

Moore said that since horse slaughter stopped in the U.S., he has seen unwanted animals abandoned, hit by cars or shot in the head and left in remote ditches to be eaten by vultures.

The mayor also said he also has seen friends who were laid off from the beef plant unable to find steady work.

Louis Stout, who managed the beef plant for 20 years before it closed, is now a cook and part-time bartender. He said that he's not sure whether he would return to what was a stressful job, but reopening the plant would give the community a much-needed boost.

"I hope they know what they're doing," he said. "I hope it succeeds. Why just shoot a horse and then leave it in a ditch? Nobody benefits."

Rockville farmer and rancher Jim Bock said reopening the plant would mean getting a fair price for a horse. After horse slaughterhouses went away, he said, the bottom fell out of the horse market.

Bock said he recently took eight horses to a sale and walked away with $100 — less than $12.50 per animal — after paying for blood tests and sales commissions.

Wallis said her company wanted a Missouri location because it would be close to major transportation hubs and within a few hundred miles of 30 percent of the country's horses. The plant will be able to process up to 200 animals a day.

The company said its plant would mainly buy healthy, mature horses, process their meat as steaks and hamburger and ship it to markets in China, Mexico, Europe and some ethnic niche markets in the U.S. In most of the world, Wallis said, horse meat would cost 40 percent less than beef.

Residents of Rockville say they just want a way to make an honest living.

"I know that the sentiment of the general public is that they don't like horse slaughter," said Kay Garrison, Rockville's city treasurer who for years worked as a horse trainer and riding instructor. "I don't like it either. But rationally, they are livestock. Not everyone views horses as pets."

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