More Setbacks in Horse Slaughter Plans

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — A New Mexico company's hard-fought attempt to convert its cattle plant to a horse slaughterhouse was dealt a series of new blows Monday, with the state denying its wastewater permit and actor Robert Redford, former Gov. Bill Richardson and the state attorney general announcing plans to intervene in a lawsuit seeking to block a return to domestic horse slaughter.

The New Mexico Environment Department told Valley Meat Co. of Roswell, which has a lapsed discharge permit, that it won't renew the permit without a public hearing because of extensive comments already received.

Valley Meat Co. attorney Blair Dunn said the lack of a permit would not prevent the plant from opening as planned Aug. 5, but it would increase the cost of doing business because the plant would have to haul its waste.

Dunn accused the state of unfairly targeting a small, family-owned business. He noted that many dairies are operating around the state with lapsed permits.

He said the state ignored Valley's request for a renewal until the horse slaughter debate became so divisive and Gov. Susana Martinez announced her strong opposition.

The denial came the same day that Redford and Richardson joined the fray, announcing formation of an animal protection foundation whose first act was to seek to join a federal lawsuit filed by The Humane Society of the United States and other groups to block the planned Aug. 5 opening of Valley Meat and another recently approved horse slaughterhouse in Iowa. The plants would be the first horse slaughterhouses in the U.S. to operate in more than six years.

Also Monday, New Mexico Attorney General Gary King said he had filed a motion to intervene on behalf of horse slaughter opponents.

"Horse slaughter has no place in our culture," said Redford.

In a telephone interview, Redford said he has been passionate about horses all of his life, and his love of the animals inspired his famous movies "The Horse Whisperer" and "The Electric Cowboy."

The goal of the Foundation to Protect New Mexico Wildlife is to connect with other horse rescue and anti-slaughter groups to raise public awareness of the plight of horses in the West, he said, then assess longer term goals for the foundation. The group will also seek to protect wildlife and support animal shelters.

Redford said he and Richardson have both donated seed money to the group, but declined to say how much.

A lifelong horse lover, Richardson in a statement said he is committed to do "whatever it takes to stop the return of horse slaughterhouses in this country and, in particular, my own state."

"Congress was right to ban the inhumane practice years ago, and it is unfathomable that the federal government is now poised to let it resume," he said.

Dunn, the Valley Meat attorney, questioned why groups like Redford and Richardson's don't "use their money to actually save animals instead of harassing people in their lawful business?"

After more than a year of delays and a lawsuit by Valley Meat, the Department of Agriculture in June gave the company the go-ahead to begin slaughtering horses. USDA officials said they were legally obligated to issue the permits, even though the Obama administration opposes horse slaughter and is seeking to reinstate a congressional ban that was lifted in 2011.

Another permit was approved a few days later for Responsible Transportation in Sigourney, Iowa.

Meat from the slaughterhouses would be shipped to some countries for human consumption and for use as zoo and other animal food.

The move has divided horse rescue and animal welfare groups, ranchers, politicians and Indian tribes about what is the most humane way to deal with the country's horse overpopulation and what rescue groups have said are a rising number of neglected and starving horses as the West deals with persistent drought.

An Aug. 2 hearing is set for the request by animal protection groups for a temporary restraining order to prevent the plants from opening.

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