Judge Extends Ban on Horse Slaughter Plant Operations

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SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A Roswell company that has been fighting for two years to restart the slaughter of horses in the U.S. was dealt another setback Friday when a Santa Fe judge extended a temporary ban on its operations.

State District Judge Matthew Wilson put Valley Meat Co.'s planned opening on hold for 10 more days so he can hear testimony Jan. 13 in a lawsuit brought by New Mexico Attorney General Gary King, who is one of several parties trying to block the company in federal and state courts.

King filed the state lawsuit last month after a federal appeals court lifted its order barring the company from opening, saying The Humane Society of the United States and other animal protection groups had failed to show a likelihood of prevailing in their appeal of a lawsuit that was thrown out last year by a federal judge in Albuquerque.

Valley Meat owner Rick De Los Santos, who had been preparing to open after the first of the year, seemed unfazed by the latest delay.

"We've been going through this for two years now," he said outside the courthouse. "We'll see what happens in 10 days."

King's lawsuit alleges the company would violate the state's food safety, water quality and unfair business practices laws.

Assistant Attorney General Ari Biernoff told the judge the company would be putting horse meat into the food chain without knowing what kind of drugs the animals might have been given in the past. He also argued that the plant would be violating environmental laws because it does not have the proper wastewater discharge permit.

Valley Meat attorney Blair Dunn argued that the state lacks jurisdiction because the meat would not be sold or consumed in the U.S. He told the judge the federal government has sole jurisdiction over meat shipped to international markets. He said the company is working with state environmental officials to ensure its waste is lawfully disposed of.

Dunn has accused the attorney general of playing politics to bolster his bid for governor.

Valley Meat and companies in Missouri and Iowa last year won federal permits to become the first horse slaughterhouses to operate since Congress effectively

banned the practice by cutting funding for inspections at plants in 2006. The last of the domestic plants closed in 2007. Congress in 2011 reinstated the funding.

De Los Santos has led the effort to force the Department of Agriculture to permit the horse slaughter plants, sparking an emotional, national debate on whether horses are livestock or companion animals.

Animal protection groups argue the practice is barbaric.

Proponents argue it is better to slaughter unwanted horses domestically than have them shipped thousands of miles to Canada or less humane facilities in Mexico.

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