President Signs Bill Blocking Horse Slaughter

BARRY MASSEY, Associated Press

In this July 16, 2004 file photo provided by the Bureau of Land Management, wild horses are seen on the at the Pryor Mountain National Wild Horse Range in south-central Montana. The attorney for a New Mexico company that has been fighting to open a horse slaughter house says the company is not going to give up despite two lawsuits and Congressional action to block the resumption of domestic horse slaughter with a ban on funding for federal inspections at equine facilities. (AP Photo/Bureau of Land Management, Ann Boucher, File)

SANTA FE, New Mexico (AP) — The resumption of commercial horse slaughter in the U.S. was blocked Friday as President Barack Obama signed a budget measure that withholds money for required federal inspections of the slaughtering process.

Although the measure provides temporary funding for the federal government, it stops the Agriculture Department from spending money for inspections necessary for slaughterhouses to ship horse meat interstate and eventually export it to overseas consumers.

"This clear message from Washington echoes the opinions of an overwhelming number of Americans from coast to coast: horse slaughter is abhorrent and unacceptable," said Matt Bershadker, president and CEO of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

The president's action came as a New Mexico judge granted a preliminary injunction against a Roswell company from moving forward with its plans to start slaughtering horses.

The ruling by state District Judge Matthew Wilson will keep alive a lawsuit by Attorney General Gary King, who's seeking to permanently block horse slaughter in New Mexico. The lawsuit could serve as a possible insurance plan in case the federal government provides inspection funding in the future.

Blair Dunn, a lawyer for Valley Meat, said the company will continue to wage a legal fight to convert its cattle processing plant to the slaughtering of horses. He contended that the federal move to withhold money for meat inspections could cause U.S. trade violations.

"I don't see them opening now. No matter what, they are not going to violate the law," said Dunn, who also represents a plant in Missouri that wants to produce horse meat.

The last domestic horse slaughterhouses closed in 2007, a year after Congress initially withheld inspection funding. After federal money was restored in 2011, plants in New Mexico, Missouri and Iowa began trying to start horse slaughtering.

King's lawsuit contends that the Roswell company's operations would violate New Mexico's environmental and food safety laws.

Valley Meat is trying to disqualify the judge who's handling the case because of comments posted by horse slaughter opponents on a Facebook page for the judge's election campaign. Wilson issued an order Friday saying he would consider setting a hearing on the company's request.

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