Spending Bill Could Ban Horse Slaughter in U.S.

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — State and federal lawsuits that have repeatedly delayed the opening of horse slaughterhouses in New Mexico and Missouri could be moot if the budget bill up for a vote in Congress this week passes without changes.

The spending bill released Monday night would effectively reinstate a federal ban on horse slaughter by cutting funding for inspections at equine facilities.

Opponents of attempts to resume domestic horse slaughter applauded the measure.

"Americans do not want to see scarce tax dollars used to oversee an inhumane, disreputable horse slaughter industry," said Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of The Humane Society of the United States. "We don't have dog and cat slaughter plants in the U.S. catering to small markets overseas, and we shouldn't have horse slaughter operations for that purpose, either."

Proponents, however, contend domestic slaughter is the most humane way to deal with a rising number of abused and abandoned horses. Currently, unwanted horses are shipped to Canada and Mexico for slaughter. Some Indian tribes support a return to slaughter, saying exploding feral horse populations are destroying their rangelands.

"It is certainly disappointing that Congress is returning to a failed policy at the urging of special interest groups while failing to provide for an alternative," said Blair Dunn, an attorney for Valley Meat Co. in Roswell, N.M., and Rains Natural Meats in Gallatin, Mo. " The result is more waste and devastation of the range and the denial of access to an export market that would have created jobs and positive economic impacts to rural agriculture communities that desperately need these opportunities."

Animal rights groups and the Obama administration have been lobbying for the funding cut, as well as outright bans on horse slaughter in the United States. Congress cut funding for inspections at horse slaughterhouses in 2006, but reinstated the funding in 2011, four years after the last of the domestic plants closed.

Valley Meat Co. has been fighting since then to convert its cattle operations to horses. The Department of Agriculture finally issued the company and two others permits last year after Valley filed a lawsuit, but the agency made it clear it was doing so only because it was legally obligated and it has joined animal protection groups in lobbying for the funding inspection cuts as well as an outright ban on horse slaughter.

Shortly after the permits were issued last summer, the Humane Society and other groups were able to block their opening with a federal lawsuit challenging the permitting process. After a federal judge threw out that suit and a federal appeals court declined to keep a temporary order against the plants in place, New Mexico Attorney General Gary King won a temporary restraining order against Valley while a judge hears his claims the plant would violate state food safety and environmental laws.

State District Judge Matthew Wilson said he will issue a written decision Friday on King's request for a preliminary injunction that would keep Valley from opening.

Dunn said a vote by Congress to cut the funding "likely renders the AG's case moot going forward, assuming it was not already moot on jurisdictional grounds," but he said it will not stop efforts to reverse the effects of what he calls "defamatory and tortious actions" from the state attorney general and animal rights groups.

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