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## Inspectors accused of failing to prevent suffering of horses at slaughterhouses

By Gloria Galloway  
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*Animal welfare group video shows horses whipped, struck, poked with electrical prods and hung to bleed while showing signs of consciousness, veterinarian says*

Horses are routinely slaughtered under poorly controlled conditions at Canadian plants and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is not doing enough to prevent their suffering, says an animal welfare group that has documented the practice.

Nearly 100,000 horses a year are brought into "stun boxes" where they are shot through the head and then hung by one leg. Their throats are then slashed so they bleed to death.

Video footage that the Canadian Horse Defence Coalition says was secretly taken at the two biggest Canadian horse-meat facilities earlier this year shows horses in anxiety and pain, the coalition says, in the minutes before their deaths.

Debi Zimmerman, an Alberta veterinarian, told a news conference Tuesday that neither Viande Richelieu Inc. in Massueville, Que., nor Bouvry Exports in Fort Mcleod, Alta., met acceptable standards during the slaughters caught on tape.

Horses were whipped, struck across the head and poked with electrical prods at the Quebec plant. And some of the horses that were hung to bleed at the Alberta plant showed signs of consciousness, Dr. Zimmerman said.

In addition, she said, the footage shows instances at both facilities when it took more than one shot to take a horse down.

Horses are high-fear flight animals, Dr. Zimmerman said. "What sets them off is anything that is unusual to them, or a sudden noise. As well, they will have great anxiety when they feel they are trapped in a small space." When they panic, it is difficult to get off a clean shot.

Officials from the meat plants did not return calls for comment on Tuesday.

Many of the horses killed at Canadian plants are imported to this country from the United States, where all horse slaughter ended three years ago. The meat is mainly sold to Europe.

Inspectors from the CFIA are supposed to ensure that the horses are humanely treated at the slaughter plants. The inspectors confirm that the animals are not breathing and display no voluntary mouth or eye movement before they are hung, the agency said Tuesday.

But the CFIA acknowledges it does not have the resources to be present every time a horse is shot. And, until barriers were erected a couple of months ago, inspectors were advised to stay out of killing rooms for their own safety when guns were being fired.

"The CFIA continues to work with stakeholders to update these regulations and ensure that animals are treated properly," said federal Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz on Tuesday.

But some experts say it is not just the welfare of the horses that is threatened.

Ray Kellosalmi, a medical doctor, said most of the horses coming to Canada to be slaughtered have not been reared for meat. They are riding horses, said Dr. Kellosalmi, "or they are race horses, or they are what we call companion animals. In other words, pets."

Those horses are often given drugs that are toxic to humans that should disqualify them from ever entering the human food chain, he said. But the CFIA has not taken adequate steps to do that, Dr. Kellosalmi said.

The CFIA says it has a surveillance testing program for chemical residues in meat. And, in response to demands from the European Union, every horse presented for slaughter at a federally inspected facility as of July 31 must be accompanied by records to indicate all the vaccines and medications it has received in the previous six months.

Pamela Corey, the senior equine veterinarian at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said in a telephone interview that testimony about inhumane conditions and regulatory infractions led to the closing of the last U.S. horse slaughterhouses in 2007. Legislation has since been introduced in Washington that would make the practice illegal.

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