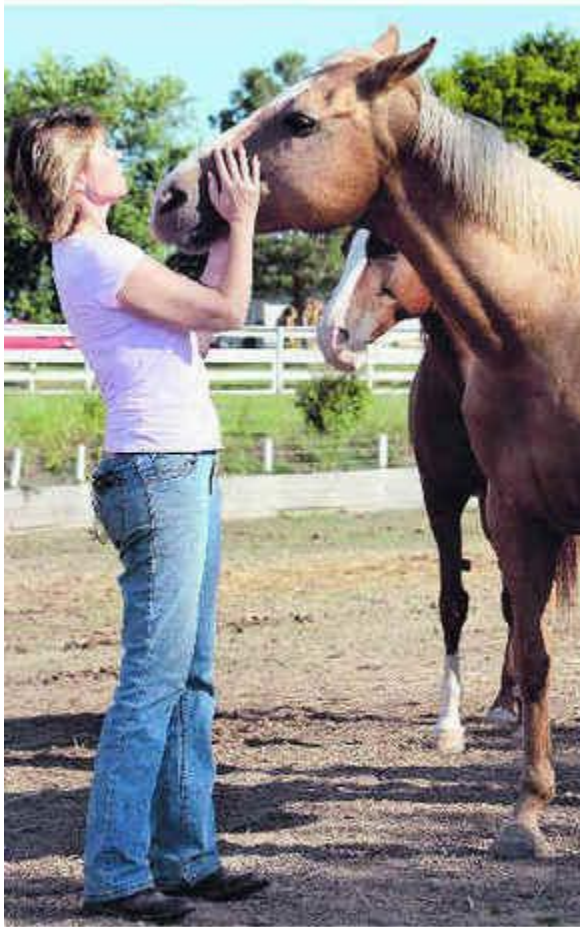


Troubled horse owners are abandoning their animals

By **KEVIN MURPHY**
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At River Bluff Rescue Ranch in Kansas City, North, director Elizabeth Hill worked with Lindee, an abandoned horse. "People can't afford the board or hay or grain," Hill said.

Unwanted horses are being left at auction barns, let go in the wild or tied to trees and fences in hopes someone will take them in. It's a growing problem in the wake of rising feed prices and new laws that bar the slaughter of horses for meat.

"There is no room at the hotel, so to speak, for many of these horses," said Nat Messer, an equine veterinarian at the University of Missouri in Columbia. "Rescue centers and retirement facilities that usually take in these horses are at capacity."

Missouri has 281,000 horses and Kansas about 178,000, according to American Horse Council reports two to three years ago. About 70 percent of horses are for show or recreation, with others mostly for work or racing. No one knows how many horses are unwanted, but the number is probably at its highest point in 20 or 30 years, said Tom Lenz, a retired Louisburg, Kan., veterinarian and past president of the American Association of Equine Practitioners.

Every week, two or three people call the Northland Therapeutic Riding Center in Kearney hoping to give away a horse, said co-director Mary Jill Webber.

The situation is dire, she said. "When you see the shape of a lot of horses, you can tell that people are not able to take care of them or don't take care of them," said Webber, who goes to sale barns sometimes. "They are nothing but skin and bones." The River Bluff Rescue Ranch in Kansas City took in an abandoned horse two months ago. Last year, it took in a starved horse that a Cass County man said he couldn't afford to feed, said ranch owner Elizabeth Hill. The man, prosecuted for animal abuse, let two horses die, she said.

"There are a lot of horses on the market at very reduced prices," she said. "People can't afford the board or hay or grain." Corn and hay prices have risen sharply. The annual cost of feeding a horse is \$2,000 to \$2,500, Lenz said, and there are also veterinary bills. About one-third of horse owners have incomes of less than \$50,000, according to the American Horse Council.

"People are losing their houses and they don't have a place for themselves, let alone a horse," said Rhonda Stephens of the Shannon Foundation, a horse rescue center near St. Clair, Mo. Unwanted horses are of various ages. Some are ailing, have behavioral issues and are no longer needed or used, according to the equine practitioners group.

There are reports of horses being left at auction barns and let loose in public conservation areas, where Lenz said they can't survive for long. Stephens said horses have been found tied to trees, suffering from broken necks and starvation. "It's horrific," she said.

Certain horses still have value, but the prices have dropped sharply in the past two years, partly because people are getting out of the breeding and training business, observers said.

There is now a Web site called DonateMyHorse.com where people can give their animals away. "Two years ago you could not have convinced me there could be a Web site like that," said Sharon Marohl, president of the Missouri Equine Council. "A cow has a minimum value. Horses no longer now have a minimum value."

While the number of unwanted horses is unclear, Messer said that historically about 1 percent of all horses are sold at auctions for slaughter — the previous destiny for many unwanted horses.

An average of 100,000 horses were slaughtered annually until last year, when Texas and Illinois became the last two states to prohibit it. At River Bluff Rescue Ranch in Kansas City, North, director Elizabeth Hill worked with Lindee, an abandoned horse. "People can't afford the board or hay or grain," Hill said.

"No one wanted to see horses go to slaughter, so the intention was good," Messer said. "It had unintended consequences that people were warned about."

Horses now have to be sent to Mexico or Canada for slaughter, but those more distant markets lowered the horses' value. Fewer horses are probably going there than went to Illinois and Texas, Lenz said. The long trips to Mexico and Canada are hard on horses. Plus, many unwanted horses who do not go to slaughter are suffering from neglect, which flies in the face of what animal rights groups wanted.

But Tori Perry of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals said the slaughter of horses is inhumane. Many horses may have been sold off by the racing and rodeo industry because they weren't athletic enough, she said. People also may have been under the wrong impression that unwanted horses sold to auction barns by individuals were going to a new home instead of to slaughter.

"You wouldn't take the family dog and sell it to a kill buyer for slaughter. The same (should go) for a horse," Perry said. Euthanasia is the best answer for horses that can't be given a new home, she said.

But, Lenz said, euthanasia and disposal of horses can also be cost prohibitive for horse owners. He said his advice to people in controlling the horse population is to euthanize rather than discard, adopt rather than buy, buy rather than breed. "People just need to think about this," Lenz said.