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National Black Farmers Association



**Dr. John Boyd, Jr., President
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Testimony before the**

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary
The Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security**

Hearing on H.R. 6598, the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act

Thursday July 31, 2008 9:30am Room 2141

Honorable Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gohmert, and members of the Sub Committee my name is Dr. John Boyd. I am President and founder of the National Black Farmers Association, which has more than 94,000 members in 46 states. The National Black Farmers Association is dedicated to serving America's Black and other small farmers through outreach and technical assistance. I am a fourth generation farmer, and I own and operate a 210-acre farm in Mecklenburg County, Virginia where I raise soybeans, corn, wheat and beef cattle. My total operation consists of farms in three counties.

An avid horseman, I currently keep two Saddlebreds and two mules, and have owned multiple Quarter Horses, too. My mules, fondly known as '40 Acres' and 'Struggle' are hard workers and in fact, they accompanied me to Washington, D.C. in 2003 when they pulled my wagon from my farm to the nation's capitol to raise awareness about racial discrepancies in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's farm lending program. The journey was the subject of much press attention and my mules seemed to revel in the spotlight.

In addition to my strong background in agriculture, I also founded the John Boyd Agricultural and Technology Institute to help educate farmers of all educational levels in order to fight illiteracy, to teach familiarity with and use of the internet, and much more. The program has assisted several thousand farmers and has been expanded to Denmark Technical College.

Recently Congress enacted the Black Farmers bill, as a part of the farm bill, which will allow 74,000 Black Farmers to have their cases heard on merit, I am proud to have led the 8-year effort for relief for our nation's Black Farmers. I am also appreciative of the leadership of Chairman Conyers and Chairman Scott and other Members of Congress who were instrumental in providing the historic relief.

I first learned that American horses are being slaughtered for human consumption overseas when HBO's Real Sports aired a segment called "Hidden Horses" on May 12, 2008. Like many Americans, I was previously unaware that such an industry existed and was horrified to learn that foreign-owned companies are preying on our horses for such an un-American purpose. To me as a horse-owning farmer, and to the members of the National Black Farmers Association, horses are part of the farm and part of the family. They are to be respected and treated with dignity and for that, they provide us with hard labor and companionship. They are not raised for slaughter and it is unconscionable that any horseman or woman would choose to end his or her horse's life in such a brutal manner.

I was so horrified to learn of this secretive trade that I immediately contacted the Animal Welfare Institute in Washington, D.C. to offer my support for their campaign to end horse slaughter. Not only did the National Black Farmers Association endorse Congressional efforts to end horse slaughter including H.R. 6598, the Conyers-Burton "Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act", but I offered to place horses at risk of slaughter on my and my members' farms. From that initial conversation a collaborative effort between the National Black Farmers Association and the Animal Welfare Institute emerged. Called "Project Wanted Horse" the initiative is designed to partner credible horse rescue organizations with my association's farmers in order to place at-risk horses on African-American owned and operated farms. We are in the initial phase of the program but anticipate that we will begin to place horses within the next month or two. Not only will good horses be placed with good people, but we will address head-on the notion that we need slaughter as a disposal for so-called 'unwanted' horses.

Although I am new to the issue of horse slaughter I have become deeply immersed in the subject in just a short period of time and have spent significant time on Capitol Hill meeting with legislators and their staff to express the National Black Farmers Association's support for the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act (H.R. 6598). The experience has been an interesting one during which I have heard all sorts of excuses about why we need horse slaughter in this country. As someone whose life is all about agriculture, a working farmer with no sort of animal protection background, I believe I am particularly well qualified to address these points and to demonstrate exactly why we can and must end the practice of horse slaughter for good.

Before that, however, I think it is worth noting that prior to my involvement with this effort I was not only unaware of the practice of horse slaughter but I was unaware – and remain so to this day – of any flood of 'unwanted' horses roaming the countryside, as some of our opponents have claimed is occurring with greater and greater frequency. The notion that horses are being turned out, abandoned, neglected and abused in increasing number as a direct result of the campaign to end horse slaughter simply hasn't been borne out where I come from,

and I say this as a working farmer with horses. What I can tell you is that economic times are tough for a lot of farmers and other folks. Hay costs more, fuel costs more, but in our region we haven't seen any noticeable increase in abandoned horses and none of my 94,000 members have reported similar occurrences in their regions, despite reports to the contrary by those who oppose the legislation before you today.

This speaks to the first argument raised by those who oppose an end to horse slaughter; the idea that we need slaughter to dispose of unwanted horses. The truth is that most horses going to slaughter are being purposely bought by middlemen, known as killer-buyers, working for the slaughterhouses rather than being sold to slaughter by their owners. In short, the slaughter market exists not to provide an outlet for unwanted horses but so that the foreign-owned slaughterhouses can profit from the trade.

However, should anyone have concerns about any surplus of horses that might conceivably exist should this bill pass into law, the National Black Farmers Association stands ready to assist by providing homes to such horses through "Project Wanted Horse". I was honored to attend the recent Homes for Horses 2008 conference in Washington, D.C. where I met with representatives from more than twenty-five equine rescues that are ready to work with me to place horses in good homes. These organizations are just the tip of the iceberg and I look forward to collaborating with hundreds of horse rescue groups across the country through "Project Wanted Horse".

I have also been told that passage of the Conyers-Burton "Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act" will disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged horse owners and that we must leave slaughter on the table as an option for those who need to dispose of a horse and whose pocketbooks are tight. The truth is that it costs a couple of hundred of dollars to have a veterinarian put a horse down, and that a person can make a couple of hundred of dollars by selling a horse to slaughter, but money isn't everything. The fact is that my organization is largely made up of lower-income, economically disadvantaged farmers and we are saying that we neither want nor need horse slaughter as an option in this country. We are willing to provide quality care for our horses and when the time comes to end our horses' lives we opt to do so by truly humane means – not by shipping them to slaughter for a quick buck.

Another point I've heard time and time again from those opposed to a ban on horse slaughter is that horse slaughter is a form of humane euthanasia. This notion is as preposterous as it is false. There is a huge difference between having a veterinarian put my horse down on my farm when the time comes, and putting my horse onto a double-deck truck packed with dozens of other horses to travel for more than a day and night without any food or water or rest, only to be brutally handled and slaughtered in the most fearful and terrifying environment. A five year old could see the difference between these two scenarios and it is stunning to me that anyone would attempt to equate the two practices. Bottom line, horse slaughter isn't humane, it's downright cruel.

Some have said that banning horse slaughter will be the start of a slippery slope – that the animal rights people will seek to ban cattle or pig slaughter next. This is a sad political spin on a serious issue of animal welfare and as a farmer – a cattle farmer at that – I find this notion ridiculous. If I had any fear that banning horse slaughter would hinder my ability to raise cattle, sheep, pigs or chickens for food I wouldn't support this legislation, but the fact is that there is no connection, no chance that ending horse slaughter will result in such a hampering of American agriculture. Americans don't raise horses for slaughter and we don't eat them. Horses are a revered animal in American history and culture. They may technically be livestock but they are much, much more and that is why Americans strongly support an end to their slaughter for human consumption overseas.

Finally, I've heard more times than I can count the argument that by banning horse slaughter Congress will be infringing upon the property rights of American citizens, and that the government has no place in telling people what they can and cannot do with their horses. If I may be so bold, this is the very same argument that was used more than one hundred years ago to perpetuate slavery. It seems that the property rights argument is raised when it is economically advantageous to ignore the plight and suffering of living beings. But the issue at hand here today – the issue of horse slaughter and the enormous animal suffering that is caused by the practice – isn't about economics or property ownership but about what is right and what is wrong. When it comes to cruelty, property-rights can and should be trumped in favor of ensuring the humane treatment of all of God's creatures, including America's horses.

The fact is that the government already restricts what Americans can and cannot do to their animals. Federal, state and local laws prohibit many forms of overt cruelty to animals - including horses – by making illegal their beating, torturing and abuse. Passage of H.R. 6598, the Conyers-Burton "Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act" would simply extend the logic contained in those anti-cruelty provisions by recognizing what all of us know – that slaughtering horses for human consumption is, when it comes down to it, an explicit form of animal cruelty.

Chairman Scott I commend you, Chairman Conyers, as well as the lead cosponsor Representative Burton and all of the supporters of this important legislation for bringing this issue to light and for offering a way to end this abject cruelty. I thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony in support of H.R. 6598, the Conyers-Burton "Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act" and urge the committee to speedily approve the legislation so that it may move through the United States Congress and pass into law.