**My Two Cents on Kill Pen & Feed Lot Horses**

Jessica Heaton

08/01/2022

I've included a link to the ASPCA's explanation of kill pens and bail outs and this is the article I will be responding to. I’m not an expert, I have just a few measly years of experience working alongside horse owners who have “bailed” horses from kill pens but this is what I have learned from my experiences in the past few years. This is my two cents, take it for what it’s worth.

While I agree that bailing horses from kill pens is not going to stop horses from ending up in kill pens and it is not going to solve our over population issue, I believe there are good horses that wind up at the pens that deserve better than being dumped at an auction and being put at risk of shipping to Canada and Mexico for slaughter.

Kill pen buyers often buy the horses from auctions. Most of the time the horses are dumped at auctions for a reason. Those reasons are typically due to the horse being injured, old, sick, conformationally challenged, genetic abnormalities, unhandled, aggressive, and dangerous. The list goes on.

BUT, some horses end up there because of the naivety of horse owners. They don’t believe their horse will be bought buy a kill pen buyer. They don’t understand that may be the reality. They believe that some one else will purchase the horse and give it a good home.

Other horses may not be able to keep the animal due to financial stressors. Some may dump their horses at auctions because they have to decide to feed their families or feed their horses. There are a vast number of reasons people make this choice. I understand that we will never know what others are going through and why they make the choices they do. Do I agree with those choices all the time? No, I don’t. But is it my place to judge without walking in someone else’s shoes? I don’t think so.

In my opinion, I wish more people would try to find good homes for their horses first before resorting to dropping horses off at auctions. I wish there were more legitimate rescues who can help people when they fall on hard times or into circumstances that require the horse to be rehomed. I wish horse owners had unlimited funds to always be able to do what is best for the animal. I wish if a horse is sick, injured, or malformed and they have little to no hope of having a healthy and positive life that they are given the a merciful end with humane euthanasia.

Every situation is different, and one size does not fit all, but I wish dropping horses off at auctions would be at the bottom of the list of options.

Unfortunately, we don’t all have the same resources and means, and I really think the vast majority of people are just doing their best and making decisions based on their personal circumstances. This is a complex issue that will never be solved overnight and the best we can do is support the animals we can, support the rescues, support your neighbors, support people you feel are doing positive and meaningful things to help. I feel we could make vast changes in this area of the horse world by helping others come to the best decision for them, their families, and the animals without fear of shame. Just treat people kindly, even if you don’t agree with them.

As for the me and my “why?” and what we hope to accomplish at Serendipity?

Over the past few years this is what I’ve gathered, the kill pen buys these animals and brings them to their facilities where they are kept and then exposed to a variety of diseases and risk for injury. It’s not a top-of-the-line environment for the horses. It presents great risks for the horses.

These horses are subjected to the stress of an auction, close quarter holding, close quarter transportation, and then sitting at the kill pen lots while they wait to be "bailed" or shipped to slaughter.

Some of the horses that end up in this situation were lesson horses, horses that someone trained and then used to feed their families with the income they provided them. Some of these horses are old, sick, and injured. Some of the horses that are in this situation are retired racehorses that got injured and thrown away like yesterday’s trash. Yes, I will agree that sometimes there are horses “who belong there” – but why can’t we humanely euthanize them instead of subjecting them to so much pain before slaughtering? To make a little bit of money off their meat? That doesn’t make a lot of sense to me either.

But those horses are the ones we hope to help when bailing and quarantining them. Even the horse who “belongs” there deserves better. With that said, I don’t believe it is the kill pens fault. The kill pen is a means to an end. Yes, they are turning a profit off it, they are not a non-profit organization.

I believe the bigger issue is people who continue to "backyard" breed their horses and not geld their stallions. Just like dogs in shelters that have been over bred, badly bred, and allowed to continually reproduce we struggle with vast amounts of homeless dogs. However, unlike dogs, there are not hundreds of thousands of homes for horses just to be adopted into. Horses are expensive. Horses require a lot of land. An average American does not have equine knowledge. Gaining horse experience and knowledge takes a lot of time and money. Bottom line, for me, is that horses should not be backyard bred. I believe THIS is a large contributing factor (if not the biggest contributing factor) as to why we have this problem and its not necessarily the kill pen’s fault. Kill pen owners conduct this business because there is a demand for the business, because where else are these horses supposed to go? There are not enough rescues, sanctuaries, and private homes to solve this problem. Just like dogs that have to be euthanized because there are just too many because humans continue to be careless and greedy when they decide to breed animals.

The kill pen brings the horses to their facilities, and they use strategies that are questionable in order to get them off the slaughter pipeline because it WILL make them more money to be “bailed” than be shipper to slaughter. What if they did not use these strategies? They would become a horse hoarding operation and many people would say “well I’ll help next month” - they scare the public and devote horse lovers into rescuing these horses from slaughter “NOW!” otherwise they will “ship”. They lie to get the horses out from under their care as fast as possible. The longer the horse is there, the more money it costs them. Kill pen owners are also humans with families to feed. What if kill pen buyers weren’t buying horses at auctions? Where do those horses go if they are left at the auction lots?

So where do we draw the line? Who decides what is “right and wrong” in this situation? I certainly don’t have all the answers. I’m not always 100% sure that I’m “right” in this case either. I second guess and question constantly. Constantly my opinion is evolving as I learn more. All I know is that if we take the time to look at others’ perspectives as best as we can, we can usually find that the majority of people we think are “wrong” are just people who are doing their best, have a different perspective than you, and trying to survive in this world by doing what they love or feel is helping. For me, I want to help sick horses coming off the lots and auctions and assist in getting them well enough to hopefully have a second chance. Some turn out to be diamonds in the rough, some don’t.

But my advice; let’s just all take the time to try and look at others’ perspectives and support others by helping where we can. Even if that is just educating them on their options when they run into the tough decision of “what do I do with this horse”. I don’t believe anyone is “right” here.