

Colorado Vets Polled on Unwanted Horse, Euthanasia Issues

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Although anecdotes suggest the number of unwanted horses is growing, there is very little data that measures the magnitude of the problem or how extensively the various options to address the issue are being implemented.

To get a better handle on this situation, Jill Montgomery of JRAM Enterprises, an equine industry consulting firm, and Tom Lenz, DVM, chairman of the Unwanted Horse Coalition, in collaboration with the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association and the Animal Assistance Foundation, developed and conducted an anonymous survey of veterinarians practicing in the state of Colorado.

An e-mail with a link to the online survey was sent out to 1,279 veterinarians, including the estimated 130 with equine practices. Of the 128 responses, 76 were from veterinarians whose practices include equine care. Respondents were distributed throughout the state, with 53%, 40%, and 7% identifying the location of their equine practices as rural, suburban, and urban, respectively.

Incidence of Horse Euthanasia

Seventy-nine percent of the equine veterinarians that responded to the survey had euthanized a horse in the past 12 months. Of these practitioners, 19% said they experienced an increase in the number of euthanasia cases compared to the previous 12 months.

Euthanasia by barbiturate overdose was used almost exclusively among this group, with only 5% of the cases involving gunshot to euthanize the animal. However, 63% of the equine practitioners answered that they would be willing to use gunshot if requested, and comments indicated an interest in training in this method of euthanasia, as it is less expensive and reduces risks associated with carcass disposal.

Incidence and Attitudes toward Euthanasia for Owner Convenience

Among the equine practitioners, 77% responded that they had seen horses they considered to be unwanted during the past 12 months. Although it was often perceived that many of these horses were unwanted due to age, injury, or sickness, 83% of the cases involved an inability to afford the costs associated with the horse.

Twenty-two percent of equine veterinarians had euthanized at least one horse for an owner's convenience during the past 12 months. While 86% of these veterinary practices reported no change in the number of euthanasias for an owner's convenience, 13% reported an increase. Almost all of this increase occurred in the rural areas of the state.

Across all veterinarians that took the survey, 31% would be willing to euthanize a healthy horse for the owner's convenience. This figure rose to 42% among the equine practitioners, and to 46% among the rural equine practitioners.

Although the survey did not directly assess if this number represents a change from previous years, the increase in euthanasia for an owner's convenience might suggest an increase in the number of unwanted horses.

While euthanasia has traditionally been used on horses with significantly reduced quality of life due to age, disease, or chronic lameness, it is more frequently seen as a solution for animals that are no longer wanted or affordable.

Euthanasia of horses for an owner's convenience represents a moral dilemma that balances the life of a healthy horse against other means of disposal and the potential for animal cruelty. The majority of Colorado veterinarians involved in this study indicated that they remain resistant to the use of euthanasia as an option for reducing the number of unwanted horses.

The critical question of how to handle the perceived increase in the number of unwanted horses remains unanswered. Study organizers noted that it is vital that the equine community identifies, explores, and implements acceptable options for the care and management of horses that are no longer wanted by their owners.--*Summary courtesy Kevin Morris (Animal Assistance Foundation) and Jill Montgomery (JRAM Enterprises)*