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# Animal Protection Voters' 2009 Legislative Agenda Seeks to Ease Suffering of Unwanted Horses in NM

— by *Monica Garcia* —

The plight of a large and growing population of unwanted horses across the United States has been attributed to the poor economic climate. News sources have reported hundreds of neglected horses, some starving to death, being found in pastures where they don't belong, alongside roadways, and even roaming free in various parts of the country with wild horses.

New Mexico is contributing its own chapters to the national story. For example, in August 2008, a gentle, skin and bones mare was discovered by Valencia County resident, Jacob Romero, who was out for a hike in the countryside. For almost four hours, Romero tried to get the horse rescued.

Animal Protection of New Mexico (APNM) staff made urgent phone calls late into the night, working to coordinate rescue for the horse. The next morning, it took rescuers hours to find the horse again. She was transported to the Bomar Equine Rescue and Rehabilitation facility, a nonprofit in Belen. Today, the elderly horse is still recovering from her nearly fatal starvation.

Now named Grace, this mare's story is just one example of a crisis unfolding in New Mexico. The state does not have adequate laws nor enough sanctuaries to ensure horses can be seized and taken care of in cases of neglect or abuse.

Many horse shelters do not take horses surrendered directly from the public. For instance, Bomar's policy does not allow for accepting surrendered horses, because they would immediately be deluged and up to their capacity of 40-50 horses.

The Horse Shelter in Cerrillos, New Mexico, is one of the state's highest capacity horse shelters for abandoned or neglected horses, able to take in up to 70 animals. The Horse Shelter's executive director, Jennifer Rios, and other shelter directors are concerned about the economy's effect on horses and on their own nonprofits.

"Funding is the most urgent need in the unwanted horse problem—funding can make all things possible," Rios said. "We have the processes in place to deal with unwanted horses,

we just don't have anywhere near the resources we need to adequately address the magnitude of the problem on a statewide level." She also pointed out that the shelter has more land to expand onto but not the financial resources to pay for infrastructure and day-to-day expenses of an expanded shelter population.

## Animal Protection Voters to propose equine protections

Given the grim situation for New Mexico's horses, Animal Protection Voters (APV), the sister organization of APNM, will address the need for equine protections in the 2009 New Mexico legislative session. APV seeks to:

- Pass a law that requires horse owners to post a bond if their animals are seized, providing a system that allows law enforcement officials to always seize animals who are being starved or mistreated. Some agencies cannot afford to pay for seized animals' care, which makes it financially impossible for them to remove animals from dangerous situations.
- Create a New Mexico Equine Protection Fund that will provide financial support to sanctuaries for abandoned or relinquished horses, and that will subsidize humane horse euthanasia and disposal.

APV recognizes that the recent closure of horse slaughter plants in the United States has not been met with enthusiasm from the entire public. However, given the inherent cruelty of the former horse slaughter system, including the grueling transport involved and the nightmarish horse slaughter operations in place in Mexico, solutions must be created. The increasingly weakened economy is only making matters worse, and there are few good options for unwanted horses.

"The situation is dire, and some horses experience miserable deaths before anyone can get to them," states APNM Cruelty Case Manager Sherry Mangold. "Part of the solution would be for owners to not allow the horses to breed. Otherwise, a lot of them are

out in fields with no shelter and inadequate food, and continuing to breed."

Despite the state's budget belt-tightening, APV Executive Director Elisabeth Jennings urges the public and policy-makers to develop humane, short- and long-term solutions.

Curtis Childress, director of animal control for the Doña Ana County sheriff's office, thinks the state will be forced to take responsibility for unwanted horses if owners do not accept their responsibility. "If the state doesn't do something, I think a lot of [horses] could be turned loose. So far, in Doña Ana County, we've been fortunate that we're not there yet," he said.

In agreement about the need for state funding, The Horse Shelter's Rios concludes, "If New Mexico does not prepare to address this problem we will find the number of stray horses continuing to climb statewide."

*Monica Garcia is communications manager for Animal Protection Voters and Animal Protection of New Mexico. You may reach her at [monica@apvnm.org](mailto:monica@apvnm.org). Garcia reminds readers that, especially now, APV sincerely appreciates contributions to its important legislative work. If you are interested in supporting this legislation go to [www.apvnm.org](http://www.apvnm.org) and click on "Get Involved."*

### Other proposed 2009 legislation to protect animals

Besides working to minimize the suffering of New Mexico's horses by seeking solutions to their most immediate needs, Animal Protection Voters (APV) proposes broadening the fourth degree felony definition and also securing capital funding for priority spay/neuter and facility projects.

In addition, New Mexico Attorney General Gary King will introduce amendments to the Family Violence Act that will help victims of domestic violence by mandating that law enforcement or animal control officers remove their companion animals from the home for their protection when the domestic violence victims leave their homes for a safe shelter. The animals will be moved to a safe shelter and cared for until the victim is able to reclaim the animals or determine where they should be placed.