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Investigation of Richelieu Meat Inc. April - June, 2007 External Report

Location:

Richelieu Meat Inc.
595 Royale Street
P.O. Box 101
Massueville, Quebec J0G 1K0

Head of Sales: Mr. François Bourvry
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Superintendent: Mr. Sylvain Gauthier
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Dates visited:

15/04/07
16/04/07
21/04/07
23/04/07
28/04/07
30/04/07
03/06/07



Horses in holding area at rear of facility

1. Facility Information:

The facility is large and complex. There is a holding area in the rear of the facility with a tarp suspended over half of it. The holding area is muddy and difficult terrain for the horses. There is a secondary holding facility consisting of pens inside the garage door (which is rarely opened high enough for the horses to enter comfortably). From the holding pens inside is a chute leading up to the kill pen. The sides are very narrow; the horses are not able to turn around once in the kill chute. The kill chute has a curve to it meaning all horses have full visual and audio of the horse in the kill pen, including its death. The cutting floor is located in the basement.

Species: Horses – American and Canadian, all in poor condition. These horses come from a wide variety of backgrounds – ex-racing horses, pleasure-riding horses (ie pets), ex-PMU mares or foals etc.

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2. Observations:

15/04/07

This was our first visit to Richelieu. We were able to see horses in the back holding area. All were listless and not moving or eating.

16/04/07

The weather was inclement on this day. It was cold and blustery with sleet and snow. Approximately half of the horses in the back holding pen were fully exposed to the weather as a roof covers only half of the holding pen. The horses were very stressed from the rough weather. The haltered horses (ie trained/broken horses) were bullied by the unhaltered horses and forced to stand in the open area that provided them with no protection from the cold. Aside from the occasional nipping and feign kicking of one another, the horses were all listless and again not moving or eating. The general condition of all horses was poor. We documented tumours, emaciation, open strangles wounds (a bacteria infection that affects the throats of horses) and many who were laming. We were not able to see any water or feed available again today. Approximately 60 cars were parked in the staff parking lot in the front of the facility.

21/04/07

In the early morning hours on this Saturday, we documented the unloading of a trailer carrying horses (license plate number B633580). The horses had been transported through the night and were onboard for at least 15 hours. They came from the Shipshewana auction in Indiana and were loaded Friday around noon. The unloading was conducted with plastic paddles being poked into the side slats of the trailer and occurred without incident. We quickly learned why when we saw that all of the horses were haltered, meaning these horses were trained/broken.



We later learned that two of these horses died shortly after their arrival. Their dead bodies were left in the rear parking lot.



Bodies of two dead American horses



Close-up of horse on left



Close-up of horse on right

23/04/07

We observed approximately 40 horses in the rear holding area as they were moved inside to be slaughtered. Handling was disorganized and rough. The garage door the horses were being run through was not open high enough causing the horses to balk at entering. Those that did enter often hit their heads when doing so. One of the workers used a whip directly on the horses to move them. Three horses were liming; one grey mare was extremely thin and appeared to have a broken hind leg.

Concerned with the handling, we requested a meeting with management. We met with Mr. Francois Bouvry, Head of Sales and Mr. Sylvain Gauthier, Superintendent. We were provided with the following information:

- 80% of the horses arrive on only one deck; 20% are loaded onto double deckers (according to the commercial transport of equines to slaughter regulation in the United States horses are not legally permitted to be loaded onto double decker trailers. However, enforcement stops at the border and those being transported to slaughter in Canada are exempt)
- Dividers are installed for every 13 horses
- The maximum duration of transport to Richelieu is 18 hours – primarily from Michigan and Iowa areas
- St. Jacobs livestock market in Toronto is their furthest market
- They've seen a 10-15% increase in American horses since the US abattoirs have closed (the majority are being transported to Mexico for slaughter)
- The USDA visited two weeks ago to check on US horses arriving at the plant
- The horses are shot with rifles in the kill pen
- The plant has one CFIA veterinarian and one in-house veterinarian. Both are employed full-time
- They report receiving one to two downers per 500 horses (but our observations do not support this. The number of dead and downers arriving or dying shortly after unloading is much higher than this – perhaps one per trailer)



Blood-smearred kill box – horse left inside

23/04/07 cont'd:

When asked why the two dead horses alongside the building had died, Mr Bouvry said the horses were “too lazy to walk to the water trough”. He provided us with a tour, which included the kill floor. **We were shocked to see horses left standing in the waiting pens and lined up solid in the single file kill chute leading to the kill pen as the workers went on lunch break. What shocked us even further though was that a horse was left standing in the kill pen, shaking with terror.** The kill pen was smeared with blood and remains from the horses before him. It was clear that this horse and the ones left in the kill chute were extremely traumatized. Many were shaking so badly standing was difficult. This was exacerbated by the fact that many had broken limbs. The grey mare we had seen earlier was extremely emaciated. We were able to confirm that her rear leg was indeed broken. In fact, all horses were in very bad condition. We saw tumours, emaciation, broken limbs and strangles (which illogically had been sliced open – extremely unhygienic as the lumps are composed of thick, highly virulent pus).



Note – electric prod used on horses (blue handle)



Horse left in blood-smeared kill pen while workers go on lunch break

28/04/07

No horses were in the outdoor pens on this morning.

We documented the unloading of American horses out of the Michigan area at 9:45 am. While the trailer was the same (license number B633580), the truck was from a different company – Brindley out of Ontario. **This driver used an electric prod to unload the horses.** We noted on this day that the trailer was highly dented – perhaps from frightened horses kicking. At one point, the driver heard a noise inside the facility and ran in. He returned about 10 minutes later and continued unloading.



Bumper sticker: “Cows deserve to be eaten”

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30/04/07

Concerned with the continued use of electric prods, even after our discussion with management about them just a week prior, we asked to meet with the CFIA veterinarian for the facility. The inspector was surprised to hear that electric prods were being used on the horses and extremely shocked to hear that horses were left in the kill chute and kill pen while workers went on break. She assured us that she would look into the problems, discuss them with the facility veterinarian and management and remedy them. She agreed that the use of electric prods is unacceptable and the leaving the horses in the kill chute and kill pen cause unnecessary suffering.

03/06/07

On this day there were approximately 20-30 horses in the outdoor holding area. All were American horses bought by Roping J Ranch from the US. As with all the others, they were listless, depressed-looking and few were moving.

At 8:18 pm a trailer carrying 30 horses that had started out in Michigan that morning, arrived and was unloaded. One horse did not survive the trip. He was pulled off and left in the parking lot. The survivors were gaunt, many were limping and all were in poor condition. Many of the horses were haltered. The haltered horses ran to the gate each time a human would pass, seeking comfort. The truck left the property at 9:10 pm.



Gaunt horse



Roping J Ranch trailer unloading



Deceased horse pulled off trailer and left in parking lot



Roping J Ranch truck and trailer

3. Areas of Concern:

1. Electric prods are being used on the horses.
2. Horses are being left in the kill chute and kill pen while workers go on lunch break.
3. At no time did we see water in the back holding area.
4. No feed or hay was available in the back holding area.
5. Conditions in the back holding area are poor – the horses are forced to stand in mud. This is especially challenging for the horses that arrive lame or with broken limbs (who should not have been loaded in the first place).
6. There is little to no shelter from inclement weather.
7. Hygiene concerns – strangles is a highly contagious bacterial infection. We were surprised to see the wounds sliced open (obviously done with a knife or scalpel) just prior to slaughter.
8. Unnecessary suffering – the cutting open of strangles wounds. These are highly painful, sensitive cysts. Slicing them open without anesthetic is unnecessary and causes suffering.
9. The trained and non-trained horses are penned together. These animals are incompatible by nature and should be separated.
10. Given the horses' fragile state of health, the percentage of dead on arrival and those dying shortly after arrival, we feel a veterinarian should always be present during unloading. This means that the in-house veterinarian or the CFIA veterinarian must be available weekends when many of the American horses are arriving. If no veterinarian is available then horses should only be transported during the weekday hours when one is.
11. The attitude of Mr. Bouvry is concerning. When asked why two horses died – he stated that they were “too lazy to walk to the water trough”. When asked about the horses left in the kill chute and especially the one left in the kill pen, didn't he feel this caused undue stress and mental suffering? He replied “No, they have no sense of smell”. This attitude shows a blatant disregard for the health and welfare of the horses killed at his plant and sets the tone for what is acceptable for the workers. From a transcript of a legal proceeding dated 2002/02/06, Citation 2002 PSSRB16 (www.pslrb-crtfp.gc.ca/decisions/fulltext/30061_e.doc) it was noted that one worker feigned sexual intercourse with the body of a dead horse. This behaviour was tolerated and encouraged by laughter from the other workers. The atmosphere at Richelieu is unprofessional and unacceptable.

4. Increasing Import Implications:

Our concerns are particularly troubling at this time as more horses are being imported into Canada from the United States for slaughter, meaning more horses are being exposed to this unnecessary suffering and disrespectful treatment. Richelieu is the second largest horse slaughter plant in Canada. There are no excuses for such obviously cruel practices.

5. Violations:

Federal Health of Animals Act

Part XII Transportation of Sick, Pregnant and Unfit Animals

138. (2) “No person shall load or cause to be loaded...and no one shall transport or cause to be transported an animal (a) that by reason of infirmity, illness, injury, fatigue or any other cause cannot be transported without undue suffering during the expected journey.”

138. (2.1) “For the purpose of paragraph (2)(a), a non-ambulatory animal is an animal that cannot be transported without undue suffering during the expected journey.”

A high percentage of the horses we documented being unloaded at Richelieu were lame, emaciated or had broken limbs. There was a high percentage of horses arriving dead or dying shortly after unloading as well.

138. (4) “No railway company or motor carrier shall continue to transport an animal that is injured or becomes ill or otherwise unfit for transport during a journey beyond the nearest suitable place at which it can receive proper care and attention.”

Investigations conducted by Animals' Angels USA (see attached report) showed that drivers delivering American horses to Richelieu DID NOT check their horses during the 15+ hour journey. This is unacceptable as horses are arriving dead – they were not loaded that way so went down during the journey. Their suffering could've been relieved had the driver checked on them and brought them to the nearest suitable place for treatment or euthanasia, as required by Canadian law.

Part XII Loading and Unloading Equipment

139. (1) “No person shall beat an animal being loaded or unloaded in a way likely to cause injury or undue suffering to it.”

139. (2) “No person shall load or unload, or cause to be loaded or unloaded, an animal in a way likely to cause injury or undue suffering to it.”

Electric prods are used on horses at Richelieu. These cause unnecessary stress to horses who are flight animals and frighten easily.

Meat Inspection Act – PART III

Examination, Inspection, Humane Treatment and Slaughter, Packaging and Labelling

62. (1) “No food animal shall be handled in a manner that subjects the animal to avoidable distress or avoidable pain.”

The horses left in the kill chute and kill pen were subjected to what amounts to emotional torture. These horses were so frightened many were having difficulty remaining standing.

65. “Every food animal in a holding pen awaiting slaughter shall be provided with access to potable water and shall, if held for more than 24 hours, be provided with feed.”

At no time over the seven visits we made did we see any water, feed or hay in the back holding area for the horses.

80. “No equipment or instrument for restraining, slaughtering or rendering unconscious any food animal shall be used by any person for those purposes (a) unless the person is, by reason of the person's competence and physical condition, able to do so without subjecting the animal to avoidable stress or avoidable pain; or (b) where the condition of the equipment or instrument or the manner in which or the circumstances under which the equipment or instrument is used might subject the animal to avoidable distress or avoidable pain.”

The design of the kill chute is poor. It allows all horses to see the horses ahead of it, including the one in the kill pen as it is killed. This causes avoidable distress and pain to those having to witness the deaths of all the horses ahead of them.

6. Conclusion:

- 1. Richelieu management, facility veterinarian and CFIA veterinarian must take appropriate measures to change the atmosphere of the facility from one of disrespect and absent-minded cruelty to one of professionalism and humane treatment.**
- 2. Horses must NEVER be left in either the kill chute or the kill pen.**
- 3. Electric prods must be banned from the facility and prohibited for use by drivers unloading horses.**
- 4. Water troughs must be installed in the back holding area.**
- 4. Feed - either in the form of a protein, multivitamin and mineral pellet or good-quality hay – must be provided at all times to the horses in the rear holding area.**
- 5. Untrained horses should be kept separate from trained horses to prevent bullying.**
- 6. Proper training in animal handling must be provided to all employees. As it is currently conducted, it is chaotic and uncoordinated causing horses to balk and flee, meaning more hits from the whip for them. The garage door must be opened fully to allow the horses easier access to the inside holding area when being run in; they are currently balking and hitting their heads. This is happening immediately prior to slaughter, further stressing them during an already distressing time.**
- 8. The in-house veterinarian or CFIA veterinarian must always be present for the unloading of horses as many are in an advanced health-compromised state and may need to be euthanized.**
- 9. CFIA must increase their presence at the facility until improvements have taken place.**

Investigation report provided by:

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