



colorado

Colorado Unwanted Horse Environmental Assessment Executive Summary



A report of the
Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance

Sponsored By:





introduction

A rise in the number of reported cases of horse neglect and abuse in Colorado over the past several years prompted a group of concerned horse industry leaders to examine the emerging issue of unwanted horses within the state. This group evolved from a Task Force to become the Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance (Alliance).

The Alliance was established in April 2008 as a nonprofit corporation with the multiple goals of conducting scientific research, educating the public, identifying and implementing programs for addressing the unwanted horse population, and assisting other organizations engaged in similar pursuits. The Alliance primarily focuses on the unwanted horses that have been transferred into the animal welfare system for care and maintenance at either private or public facilities.

The Board of Directors includes representatives with strong industry knowledge from the Colorado Horse Council, Colorado Veterinary Medical Association, Colorado Department of Agriculture, Colorado Bureau of Animal Protection, Colorado State University Equine Sciences Program, and Animal Welfare Council. The Alliance also includes representatives of the American Humane Association and the Animal Assistance Foundation. While the latter groups have traditionally been associated more with companion animals (dogs, cats) than with livestock, their perspective, experience and concern remain valuable to our collective efforts.

The American Horse Council's Unwanted Horse Coalition defines unwanted horses as those whose current owners no longer want them because they are old, injured, sick or unmanageable, or fail to meet the owners' expectations. The Alliance recognizes a further component: an owner's inability or unwillingness to continue to own and care for a horse.

Horses unsuited for their owners' purposes have always been part of the horse population in Colorado, but until recently there were ways to address the issue, and the problem was generally considered manageable. Not so any more. Economic factors as well as the closure of the U.S. processing plants have increased the number of unwanted horses in the marketplace and heightened industry and public awareness of the problem.

unwanted horses

Roots of the Issue

Traditionally, livestock auctions provided a reliable marketplace for disposing of unwanted horses that either did not sell through private treaty or find homes through other means such as rescue and sanctuaries. The animals offered at auction could find new recreational or agricultural uses, but annually about 1% entered the food chain, being sent for processing for human consumption in export markets.



In September 2007, the last US packing plants that processed horses for human consumption closed. The supply of unwanted horses now far exceeds the industry's ability to absorb it. The horse industry must find new means to cope with the issue.

In recent years, the public perception has blurred regarding the distinction of a horse as livestock versus a companion animal, at the same time that Americans have moved further toward the anthropomorphization of companion animals. This shift presents a new paradigm for the horse industry.

With a grant from the Animal Assistance Foundation (AAF), the Alliance conducted an Environmental Assessment to identify the scope of the problem and to look at available statistics, perceptions, and possible solutions for managing Colorado's unwanted horses. During February and March, 2008, 2,019 participants completed a 33-question online survey and 123 people from different horse industry stakeholder groups participated in 10 focus groups. Available data points were gathered from 6 different governmental agencies and 18 horse rescue facilities.

By the Numbers

Direct measurement of Colorado's unwanted horse numbers is challenging; consistent, connected tracking systems and measurement methodologies need development. Several indicators point to the number being a small fraction of the state's total herd; however, due to the expense and intensive management required by equines, even a small percentage of the state's horses falling into unwanted status creates a strain on available animal welfare resources.

- The 2005 census of horses in Colorado shows 255,503 animals (AHC).
- This figure is a 57% increase compared to a 2000 census of 145,000 (CASS).
- Differences in collection methodologies account for some of the increase (USDA).
- Colorado's human population growth over the same period is 10.5% compared to the national growth change of 6.4% (U.S. Census Bureau).
- This growth may represent an increase in horse owners new to the activity (AAF).
- The number of Colorado horse owners identified in 2005 is 55,686 (AHC).
- Equine cruelty investigations increased from 1,067 cases in FY 2006 to 1,498 cases in FY 2007 (BAP).
- Cost of emergency care for recent cases of impounded horses ranged from \$25,000 to \$120,000 per incident (AAF).
- The Colorado horse rescues interviewed (61% of those that could be identified) have a carrying capacity of 611 animals (AAF).
- The placement rate (roughly comparable to live release rate) was 60% of facility capacity for the year 2007 (AAF).
- Numbers of horses originating from Colorado that were exported to Mexico and Canada increased 62% (276) from Dec 2006 to Dec 2007 (APHIS).
- Conservative estimates put the cost of maintaining one unwanted horse in retirement for 11 years at \$25,740 (AWC).

Categorized as "Unwanted"

Within the Colorado herd, unwanted horses generally fall into one of several categories: those sold at auction to be processed for food; those given away or abandoned; those available for adoption through horse rescues or

surplus from the BLM Wild Horse program; finally, those that have been impounded by government agencies under cruelty investigations or charges.

Assessment designers defined unwanted horses using two concepts:

- 1) Category type (reasons the horse became unwanted)
 - The survey respondents most commonly identify unwanted horses as “old, injured or sick.”
- 2) Condition description (describing the status of the horse)
 - Horses arriving at rescues or being investigated for cruelty charges were given a 2.5 on the Henneke Scale or a rating of “Thin to Very Thin.”
 - Exceptions to this norm were noted as horses surrendered directly to rescues by their owners, and mustangs. These unwanted horses could be carrying more, or too much, flesh.

From the Records

The Colorado Department of Agriculture documents the sale of all livestock with brand inspections; brand inspections conducted at livestock markets are tracked as a subset of the total. The department also tracks investigations into animal cruelty reports.

- Between 2003 and 2007, annual brand inspections for horses tracking total sales, were 15 - 16% of Colorado’s total herd, based on 2005 census figures.
- For the same time period, numbers of horses inspected at livestock auctions varied more, with FY* 03-04 at 7%, FY 04-05 and 05-06 at 4% and FY 06-07 6% inspection rates, based on 2005 census figures.
- Cruelty investigations conducted by the Bureau of Animal Protection increased steadily over the past three years, with FY 04-05 at 975 cases, 05-06 at 1,067 and FY 06-07 at 1,498 cases. The current year 07-08 trends indicate another large increase this year.

**FY State’s Fiscal Year is Jul 1 to Jun 30.*

The USDA Animal Inspection Service (USDA APHIS) identifies total numbers of horses receiving export certifications in Colorado for transport to Mexico or Canada. The certificates do not indicate the purpose for export; however, the increase in export shipments is notable.

NUMBER OF HORSES EXPORTED TO CANADA AND MEXICO

	TOTAL UNITS	CANADA UNITS	MEXICO UNITS
2004- 1 mo	80	0	80
2005-12 mo	379	146	233
2006-12 mo	457	217	240
2007-12 mo	733	266	467
2008- 3 mo	107	19	68
Totals 40 mo	1756	648	1108

The Colorado Area Office of the USDA APHIS Veterinary Services identified another potential number that offered an indirect estimate of the scale of the market: the number of horse slaughter identification tags dispensed between December ‘04 and March ‘08 was 20,100. The number may have little correlation with the number of horses actually sent to slaughter during that period; once dispensed, the office does not track tags.

Input from the Field

Interviews and focus group sessions were conducted with representatives from horse rescue facilities, the Bureau of Animal Protection, selected sheriff departments, and municipal and private animal shelters. Input was incorporated into these findings where overlap with rescues was noted. Structured interviews concentrated on the services provided by horse rescue facilities.

- Thirty-one (31) horse rescues were identified across the state and 18 responded to requests for interviews.
- The organizations primarily serve urban populations concentrated along the Front Range. Solid representation is also noted on the Western Slope and in the Four Corners area.
- Service categories offered were rescue (18) and rehabilitation (16), followed by retirement (9) and sanctuary care (8).
- Animals served in 2007 were recorded as a total of 773 with 370 from this group of horses still in care and 372 placed in new homes. The balance were euthanized. (Annual turnover rate of 48%.)
- Eleven of the horse rescue operations responding (or 61%) stated they were currently at capacity; the balance listed networking to find foster homes if the facility could not accept a horse, or did not maintain horses directly, or did not answer this question.
- Most rescues stated they were organized as charities and are dependent on donations, although a mix of funding sources, including personal, was common among respondents. Only one rescue identified contracts with local government.



- Six facilities reported operational cash reserves of 3-6 months; two reported “unlimited due to personal reserves,” and one reported it would close in 5 days if funding were interrupted. Some refused to answer the question.
- All facilities received animals from varied sources such as vet referral, government impounds, and owner surrender.
- Animals received were not identified by category such as neglect, abandonment, or abuse. Condition of animals received was noted, mostly as old, sick, or injured.
- Most rescues have a stable or barn, as well as land; some accept horses at a collection point and then send them onto fostering facilities.
- 15 of 18 operations believed rescues should be credentialed, registered or licensed.
- Longevity of the horse rescue organizations that were interviewed:

Years of Service	1-5	5 -10	10-14	15+
# of organizations	7	1	4	6

- Rescue facilities cited these areas of concern: the ability to accommodate the increased needs of incoming animals; the rise in neglect and possible abuse cases due to changing economic conditions; limited euthanasia options; and increased numbers. Many were concerned with the public opinion of rescues worsening as a result of media coverage of rescue failures.
- Several of the horse rescue facilities interviewed may offer models for establishing industry standards and best management.

Colorado has five herds of wild horses and burros on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Control of stocking ratios on public land dictates that a certain number of these animals are at risk to become unwanted. A Colorado Wild Horses and Burros Program director reported:

- Colorado’s herds are managed at total levels between 800-1,000 animals.
- Wild horse reproduction rates average approximately 20% annually.
- Wild horse adoptions average 200-250 annually for Colorado, and about that many animals are removed from the herd management areas annually, so Colorado maintains a balance in the gathered wild horse populations.

- Because this is a federal program, facilities in Colorado are asked to absorb surplus stock from other states, which creates a surplus of wild horses in the state.
- A wild-horse training facility in Canon City, Colorado, which is part of the prison system vocational training program, houses an additional 750 wild horses and burros.
- If a wild horse fails to be adopted after being offered three times, or if it reaches the age of 11 years, it may then be sent to a lifelong sanctuary or sold at auction.
- Currently 60% of the \$35-40 million annual budget of the BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro Program is spent on feed for horses, with 22,000 horses in sanctuary. Sanctuaries are currently full and solicitations to recruit additional facilities are open.

Carcass disposal in Colorado: groups working with unwanted horses cited a need for low cost and accessible means for euthanasia and carcass disposal.

- There are fourteen state-certified carcass-hauling services.
- Costs for pick up and disposal of a euthanized horse ranged between \$150 and \$2000 depending on the service requested.
- Colorado has one rendering company listed in the National Renderers Association Directory.
- Numerous landfills accept carcasses for disposal fees ranging between \$50 and \$70.
- Several large cat or wolf sanctuaries accept the remains of horses that have not been chemically euthanized.
- Crematoriums and bio-digestion facilities are available in several communities or university programs.

Hearing from Industry Experts:

The Alliance conducted ten (10) focus groups with a total of 123 participants, including representatives from government agencies, horse rescue groups, charitable and animal welfare organizations, breed and other equine organizations, as well as individual ranchers, farmers, trainers, clinicians, veterinarians, animal welfare law enforcement officers, educators, ethicists, brand inspectors, farriers, students and others.

The focus group process expanded on survey input with key informants commenting on four major areas covered in the survey: issue awareness, quantification of the issue, responsibility for the issue, and recommendations toward solutions. Notes were transcribed in detail, and responses summarized into key themes.

The recurring themes most commonly expressed in focus groups were:

1. High awareness of the unwanted horse problem and concern that the problem will worsen, perhaps become critical, with declining economic conditions.
2. Perception of increase in number of unwanted horses was based on personal observation.
3. Source of problem is due to closure of slaughter facilities and abundance of mid- to low-grade horses.
4. Lack of knowledge of horse ownership expenses and lack of “financial cushion” create conditions for unwanted horses and contribute to cases of animal neglect.
5. Discourage indiscriminate breeding and support “real jobs for real horses.”
6. Lack of euthanasia options creates a dilemma.
7. Lack of options creates default management and cost to Colorado government, animal welfare groups and horse rescue groups.
8. Horse rescue facilities require some type of monitoring or licensing to ensure that unwanted animals are not going from bad to worse conditions.



Finding the Facts Wanting:

The gap between the growing numbers of unwanted horses and the existing service capacity has not been measured exactly because tracking systems are not in place to communicate between the entities working on the issue. The data collected offer insight for deductive analysis, but lack precision.

Improved tracking systems will assist both resource and operations entities to develop sustainable management practices for unwanted horses. To be useful, the system will include standardized terminology to describe the condition in which the horse was received, reason for impound or surrender, underlying reason for horse becoming unwanted, scale of severity of the case, and reason for euthanasia (if chosen). Consistent terminology to describe service categories for facilities would also be helpful.

Perceptions and Popular Opinion:

Responses were gathered from stakeholders most affected by and involved in the issue of unwanted horses in Colorado. The survey was distributed to key contacts within the horse industry; these contacts in turn sent it to their respective databases, stakeholder groups, and associates. A snapshot of respondents includes:

- 77% of respondents were horse owners.
- 77% were identified as part of horse industry, industry support and/or horse organizations.
- 18% were members of the general public.
- 4% were part of the government.
- 68% were between age 36 and 61 (age was only the mandatory question).
- 67% have transferred ownership of horse.
- 53% transferred ownership for profit.

The survey had five sections (Awareness of issue, Categories of unwanted horses, Impact to industry, Responsibilities for care, cost, end of life decisions, and Recommendations for solutions). Section One (Awareness) and Section Five (Recommendations) offered respondents the opportunity to expand their responses. Over 5,000 open-ended responses were recorded. Each of the responses were reviewed and common themes were noted.

SECTION ONE: Awareness

Respondents were asked 6 questions to measure their awareness of the problem. Selected questions offered an option to write in additional information or to express an opinion.

Key Responses

- 78% were aware that horses were being shipped to Canada and Mexico for processing for human consumption.
- 92% stated they were aware of the problem of unwanted horses; 63% indicated their primary source of this awareness was personal observation.
- When asked if they knew why there was an increase, 79% responded “yes” and many wrote in to share opinions.



More than 1,500 respondents expanded their answers using an open-ended response option. The top three reasons cited for the increase were: closure of the US slaughter facilities; horse care too expensive (especially in conjunction with rising cost of living expenses); and limited or no options for horse euthanasia.

Themes from individual input (364 responses)

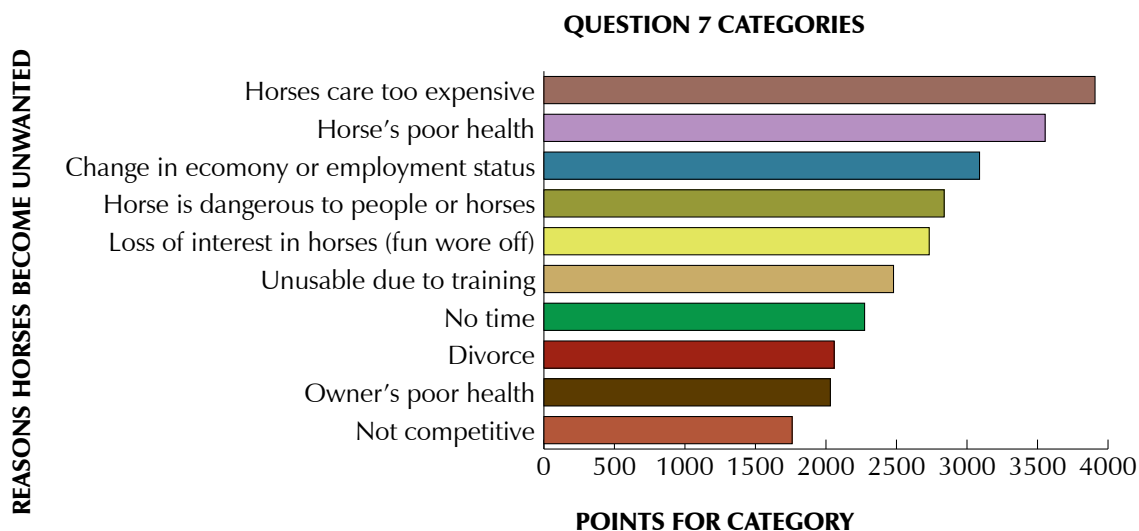
1. High awareness of issue (within industry), concern growing within the last 2 years.
2. Personal observation and media coverage is fueling awareness.
3. Respondents had difficulty in estimating the number of unwanted horses or identifying a source of numbers, yet hold strong beliefs that the problem exists and is worsening. Reasons cited for the increase were: closing slaughterhouses and the tightening economy.
4. Mixed emotions about horses as companion animals or livestock cloud reaction to processing for human consumption.
5. People have limited or no options for end-of-life solutions.

SECTION TWO: Categories

Respondents were asked two ranking questions to identify the three most common categories of unwanted horses and reasons for unwanted horses.

Key Responses

- Old, injured and sick horses made up the largest collective percentage as the primary category of unwanted horses. Horses that lacked training, were dangerous, or did not meet owner expectations comprised the second general category of unwanted horses.
- Reasons for a horse being unwanted can be grouped into two umbrella categories: 1) economic factors and 2) the horse’s usefulness to the owner.



SECTION THREE: Impact to Industry

Respondents were asked four questions about what they believed the impact of unwanted horses would be on the image of and participation in the horse industry in general.



Key Responses

- 65% thought the numbers of new horse owners would not change in response to an increase of unwanted horses.
- 66% thought the image of groups representing horses would be hurt in response to an increase of unwanted horses.
- Respondents were split on what effect they thought an increase in unwanted horses would have on the image of groups caring for unwanted horses. 40% thought their image would be hurt, 38% thought their image would be helped. The remainder (22%) thought there would be no change.

These responses may reflect the drop in sales prices for horses and the highly publicized rescue failures in January 2008, in which more than 100 animals were removed from three different horse rescue facilities.

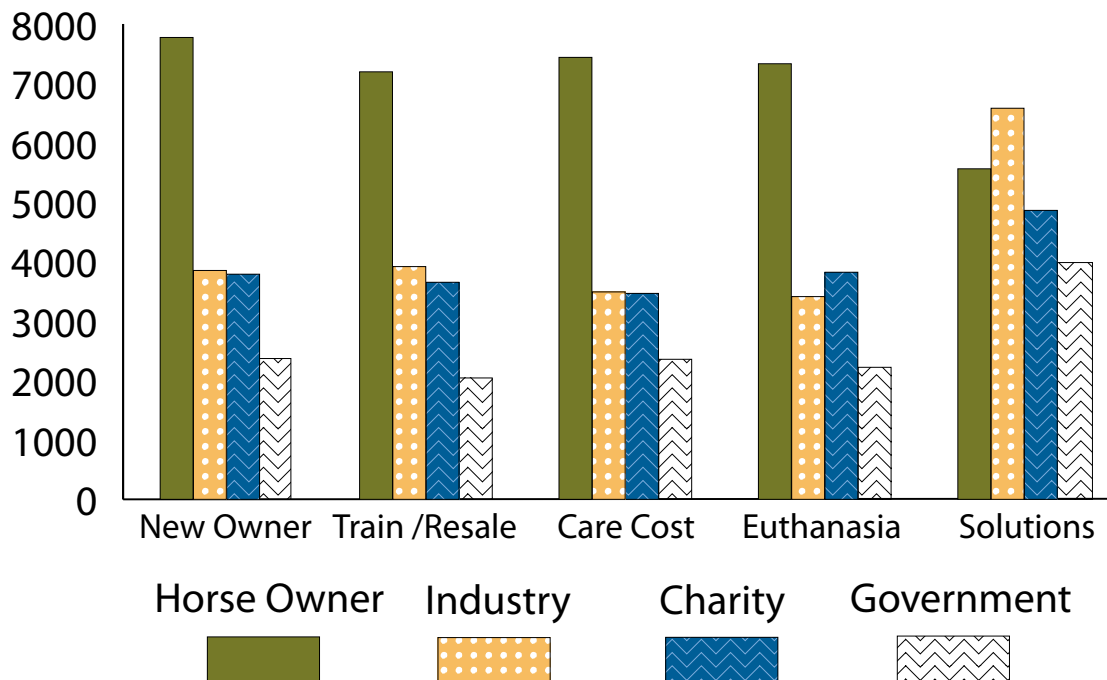
SECTION FOUR: Responsibility

Respondents were asked five questions about who should have responsibility for decisions about the care and management of unwanted horses. *NOTE: "Owner" meant the person or entity that possessed the animal at the time a decision or act was required.*

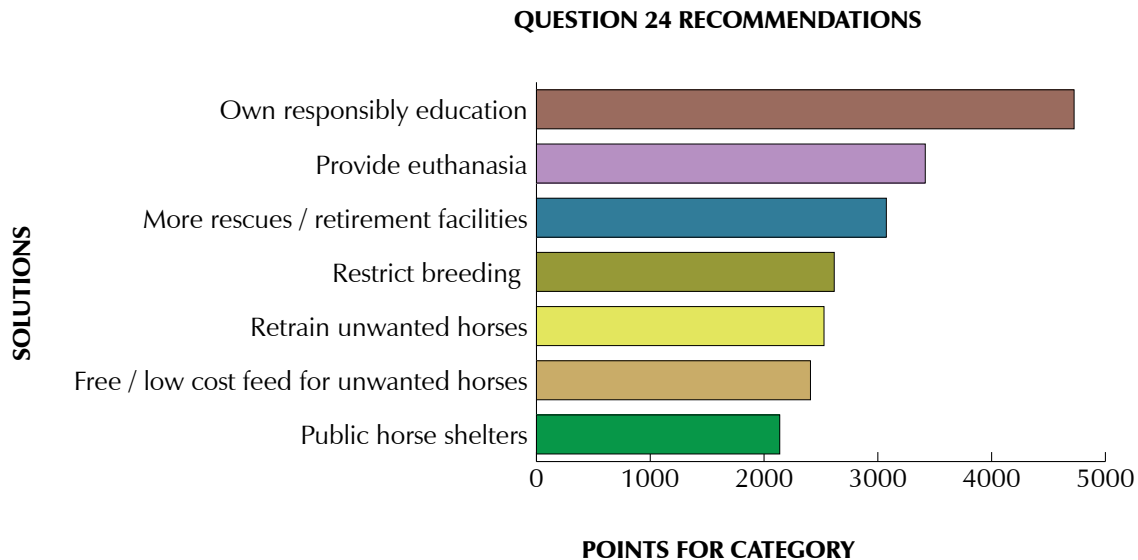
Key Responses

Regarding who should assume responsibilities (for an unwanted horse's new ownership, for training it for resale/placement, for its costs of care, and for the decision to euthanize it), respondents' answers all followed the same pattern. The only variation was the answer to the question of responsibility for creating solutions for the problem.

SECTION FIVE: Recommendations



Respondents were offered several possible solutions and asked to rank their preference. They were also asked 5 questions about what they thought would work to control horse breeding and ownership.



- Three quarters (75%) of respondents believe owner education can effectively control ownership and breeding to reduce the number of unwanted horses.
- 69% of respondents indicated legislation or regulation should not be expanded to control horse ownership.
- 57% of respondents indicated legislation or regulation should not be expanded to control horse breeding.
- 78% indicated that recent closures of U.S. packing plants that process horses have increased neglect.

Respondents were also offered an opportunity to write in suggested solutions. The 868 responses were organized into eight themes.

Themes from individual input:

- Reopen slaughter facilities.
- Provide euthanasia options.
- Many respondents expressed confusion about horses as companion animals or livestock; that confusion was also reflected in their response to proposed solutions.
- No easy answers to a complex problem, requires a systematic approach to solutions.
- Confusion about the role of government and its responsibility.
- Breeding restrictions and licensing should be considered.
- Anger at animal rights groups blamed for closing slaughter facilities.
- Concern that horses are visible victims of what many refer to as an evolution towards a “disposable” or “throwaway” mentality in American society.



Key Findings from all Environmental Assessment Data Sources:

Data gathered in this environmental assessment point to the escalation of numbers and public expense associated with the unwanted horse due to both the closure of the traditional livestock markets for handling surplus animals and to the current economic conditions. Development of a stronger public safety net for unwanted horses is needed.

When no horse rescue facility is available, default care and cost goes to governmental entities that often lack human resources, knowledge, infrastructure, and support to effectively deal with unwanted livestock. Humane officers and sheriffs are seeing increased horse surrender and abandonment. There are limited charitable facilities, most operating without formal standard operating procedures. Permanent, public facilities accepting impounded horses or horses needing quarantine or emergency intercessory care are not available in most Colorado communities. Communication between agencies and services that assist with unwanted horses needs to be expanded.



Education is recommended as a cornerstone to the solution, using multiple approaches designed to reach all levels of horse-interested parties and policy makers. Options for cost-effective, humane euthanasia are needed. Proposed solutions and intervention should be industry based, but include government agencies.

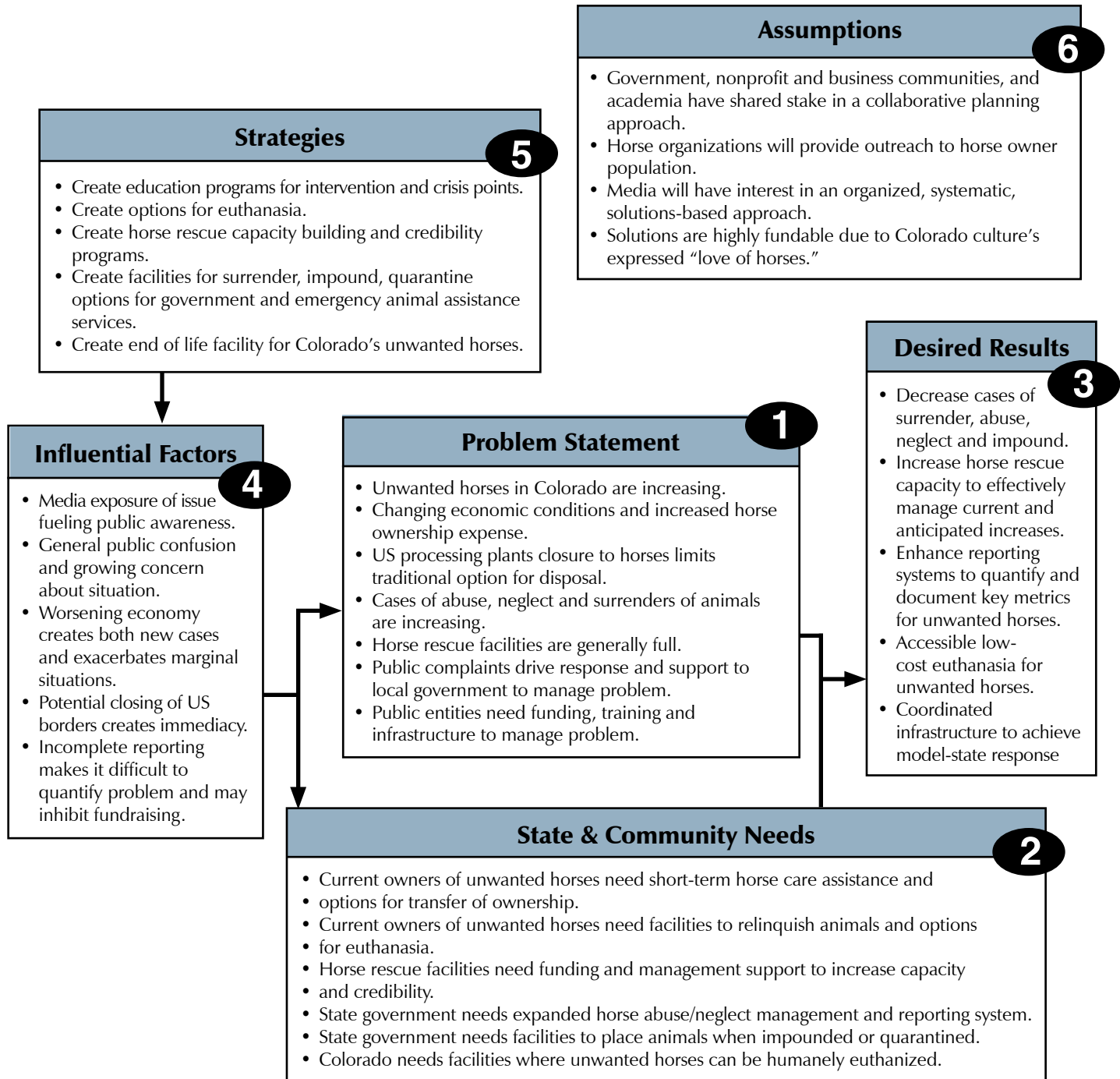
A proactive approach by the horse industry, government, and horses owners, aimed at improving existing animal welfare systems and promoting responsible ownership of horses, may greatly reduce the problem of unwanted horses in Colorado. Critical to the success of efforts to improve the process will be reliable and common measurement and reporting tools within the animal welfare system.



Unwanted Horse Environmental Assessment Summary

Problem: Colorado Unwanted Horses

This **Logic Chart** collects the findings of the environmental assessment and suggests the connectivity and potential directions to reduce or resolve the problem.



End Notes:

1. (HIA) Horse Industry Alliance polled American households regarding equine activities and experience with horses.
2. (AAF) Colorado Unwanted Horse Environmental Assessment Report, ©2008 Animal Assistance Foundation, Denver, CO. A commissioned report by J. Montgomery and N. Fell.
3. (AHC) ***The Economic Impact of the Colorado Horse Industry*** ©2005 American Horse Council Foundation, Washington DC. A commissioned report by Deloitte.
4. (CASS) ***1999 Colorado Equine Survey / Colorado Horse Power, A brief look at the numbers and economic impact of Colorado's Horse Industry on Colorado's Economy***, a project of the Colorado Horse Development Authority with USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, Sept 1999 Survey reported in Feb 2000 Colorado Horse Power.
5. (USDA) ***Equine 2005 Part II: Change in the U.S. Equine Industry 1998-2005***, USDA Report, <http://nahms.aphis.usda.gov>
6. (U.S. Census Bureau) Source: U.S. Census Bureau: ***State and County Quick Facts***. Data derived from Population Estimates, Census of Populations and Housing, <http://quickfacts.census.gov> cited 3 March 2008.
7. Data compiled by the Office of Livestock Disease, Animal Health, Animal ID, Colorado Department of Agriculture, Division of Animal Industry, Denver CO, March 2008.
8. (USDA APHIS) Export Certification System Report: Health Certificate Endorsed Summary for All Certificates, Dec 2004 to Mar 2008.
9. (AWC White Paper) The Unintended Consequences of a Ban on the Humane Slaughter (Processing) of Horses in the United States, Copyright 2006, Animal Welfare Council

A report of the Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance

Sponsored By:



Prepared By
JRAM Enterprises, Inc.