

Horse slaughterhouses

Report on site visits in Argentina and Uruguay

October 2024

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1 Preface

During a sixteen-day tour of Argentina and Uruguay in October 2024, five horse slaughterhouses were visited: LandL, Solemar, Lamar, Clay and Sarel. The aim of these annual visits is to obtain a snapshot of the state of animal welfare at the slaughter sites, as well as to evaluate the horses' behaviour, the role of the handlers, the quality of the infrastructure and the effect of environmental factors. The visits followed on from earlier visits and made it possible to identify positive or negative trends. The Infriba slaughterhouse was not visited this year, but a face-to-face meeting was arranged to discuss changes relating to animal welfare over the past year. In addition to the visits to the slaughterhouses, an agrotechnical college, a livestock market, a cattle slaughterhouse, universities and a studbook breeding farm were also visited, which provided a broader overall context.

The following report reflects the findings (visual observations) at the time of the follow-up company visits, which lasted a few hours per company. The assessment of animal welfare was based on four central parameters: the animal itself (genetics, fatigue, stress etc.), the handlers (experience, approach, interaction), the infrastructure (such as the unloading bay, waiting area, restraint box) and the environment (weather factors, climate, lighting and noise level). This means that an assessment of animal welfare and behaviour is always a snapshot and that the inspection must be repeated regularly. In addition, photographic and video material was gathered during the site visits in order to be analysed afterwards. This multidimensional framework allows not only to identify deficiencies or improvements in one area, but also to understand the interrelationships between them.

The site visit was conducted by Prof. Dr Bert Driessen (Ghent University), who has 25 years' experience in the field of animal welfare and behaviour, and more specifically in relation to the monitoring of animals during transport and the holding facilities at slaughterhouses and cattle farms.

Bert Driessen wishes to thank the slaughterhouse employees for their hospitality and openness and for the freedom to come and go as required during the annual visits.

2 Programme

The itinerary started in Argentina with visits to the LandL, Solemar and Lamar slaughterhouses. This year, the Infriba slaughterhouse was not visited, but a meeting with Infriba representatives was held in Pilar to discuss the results of the changes made over the past year. An agrotechnical college, a cattle market and the Rio Platense cattle slaughterhouse were also visited. Presentations were given at USAL University in Pilar and UCA University in Buenos Aires on animal welfare and steps taken in Argentinian slaughterhouses in recent years to optimise animal welfare. The Río de la Plata was then crossed with a view to visiting the Clay and Sarel horse slaughterhouses in Uruguay. On the last day of the trip, a studbook breeding farm for Criollos was visited.

Friday, 18 October 2024

Visit to/audit of the LandL slaughterhouse (Argentina)

Visit to agrotechnical college in Rio Cuarto

Monitoring the unloading of horses at the LandL slaughterhouse unloading bay (Argentina)

Monday, 21 October 2024

Visit to/audit of Solemar slaughterhouse (Argentina)

Tuesday, 22 October 2024

Lecture at USAL University in Pilar

Meeting with representatives of the Infriba slaughterhouse (Argentina)

Wednesday, 23 October 2024

Visit to the Cañuelas cattle market (Buenos Aires Province, Argentina)

Thursday, 24 October 2024

Visit to/audit of the Rio Platense cattle slaughterhouse

Lecture at UCA University in Buenos Aires

Friday, 25 October 2024

Visit to/audit of Lamar slaughterhouse (Argentina)

Monitoring the unloading of horses at the Lamar slaughterhouse unloading bay (Argentina)

Monday, 28 October 2024

Visit to/audit of Clay slaughterhouse (Uruguay)

Visit to the assembly centre of a supplier to Clay (Uruguay)

Monitoring the unloading of horses at the Clay slaughterhouse unloading bay (Uruguay)

Tuesday, 29 October 2024

Visit/audit of Sarel slaughterhouse (Uruguay)

Monitoring the unloading of horses at the Sarel slaughterhouse unloading bay (Uruguay)

Wednesday, 30 October 2024

Visit to El Gavilan Criollo studbook breeding farm (Uruguay)

3 Summary

All the horse slaughterhouses visited were in operation at the time of the visit. It was therefore possible to focus the visit not only on the infrastructure but also on the animals, the staff (and their interactions with the horses) and the environment (including weather conditions). The following elements were observed at each slaughterhouse: the enclosures, the waiting area, the (process of driving to the) restraint box and the stunning process. In addition, any changes in infrastructure and practices since previous visits were studied and assessed.

The unloading bays

The unloading of the horses was closely observed at four of the visited slaughterhouses. One positive aspect was that compartmentalisation was used in the trucks at many locations, which increases stability during transport and reduces fighting for dominance. The calmness with which the unloading was carried out was noticeable: in most cases flags were used as visual stimuli.

The unloading bays varied in terms of equipment and protection. There is a raised unloading bay (at the same level as the trailer floor) at each location that was visited. Three slaughterhouses have a covered unloading bay. This has the advantage that weather influences, such as direct sunlight combined with lines of shadow, do not hamper the unloading process. In three slaughterhouses' unloading bays, several horses were able to walk side by side. In two slaughterhouses, the horses were unloaded one by one and in single file. Anti-slip measures were used at each location. Lighting with disturbing flicker frequencies was found at two locations, a point that has been pointed out repeatedly over the years.

The enclosures (or corrals)

Corrals where horses can be kept are to be found adjacent to the slaughterhouses. Only adult horses were present in the corrals. In all cases, the horses had unlimited access to drinking water and were provided with roughage such as alfalfa. The quality of the drinking water facilities varied. Regular maintenance of the water troughs is a necessity. The corrals are varied, ranging from a collection of fields to a fully covered structure. Some corrals offered shelters or natural shade from trees, but these were not always sufficient for larger groups of animals. Although attention has been paid to planting natural shelter in the past few years, more trees can still be planted. The soil conditions were good in all the corrals.

The waiting areas

In the waiting areas, an assessment was carried out of the availability of peaceful conditions, space, ventilation and access to drinking water. In all slaughterhouses, every horse had unlimited access to drinking water. In four slaughterhouses, this was in wholly or partly covered areas that were large enough to mitigate temperature fluctuations. The horses were usually standing in small groups and remained relatively calm. The location of the waiting area in relation to the restraint box varies from

site to site. In some slaughterhouses, the waiting area is close to the restraint box. At other sites, there is a longer driving corridor between the waiting area and the restraint box.

Driving the horses to the restraint boxes

Horses were often driven to the restraint box in groups of two or three at a time. The side walls of the corridors are solid in most slaughterhouses to minimise distractions. The handlers worked calmly and purposefully. In a number of cases, the use of visual aids such as flags was considered unnecessary; the animals followed the path to the restraint box of their own accord.

Due to a legal requirement, the horses are doused manually or using an automatic system before stunning so that any dust in their coat is washed away. Any form of dousing is stressful for the horses due to the noise and water jet and from an animal welfare perspective it would be better to omit it.

The process of entering the restraint box went smoothly for most of the horses. Some of the animals were somewhat reluctant, possibly due to disturbing factors such as flickering lights, reflections, noises or smells.

Stunning

Stunning was carried out in all the visited slaughterhouses using a mechanical or pneumatic captive-bolt gun. In each of the slaughterhouses inspected, a "backup" device (mechanical penetrating captive-bolt gun) was present at the level of the restraint box. In many cases, the time between stunning and bleeding was correct and within the standard of a maximum of sixty seconds. However, this maximum was slightly exceeded in a few observed cases. It is crucial to ensure a faster transition between stunning and bleeding to minimise the risk of suffering. Camera surveillance had been installed at various locations to monitor the slaughter process and make it possible to analyse any incidents afterwards. This is a positive development and should be copied at locations where such monitoring is not yet present.

Regarding personnel, it was established that regular refresher courses and internal training programmes are being implemented at several locations. In certain cases, personnel changes have been made due to non-compliant behaviour towards animals. This also shows that animal welfare is increasingly being made a fixed component of personnel policy.

4 Conclusion

The site visits conducted in October 2024 show that animal welfare awareness in the horse slaughterhouses of Argentina and Uruguay has further increased. There is ongoing investment in infrastructure, training and monitoring. However, there are still systematic points of attention, such as drinking water quality, the availability of shelter and the avoidance of disturbing environmental factors such as flickering lights or loud noises. It is encouraging that several slaughterhouses have proactively introduced improvements on the basis of previous recommendations.

Future site visits remain essential to taking these developments further and ensuring a consistent, animal-friendly policy in which every link – from transport to slaughter – is subject to critical reflection and continuous improvement.

5 Photographic material



