

Online animal welfare monitoring in horse slaughterhouses

Global reporting period 2022-2023



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May 2024

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Preface

In 2021, online monitoring was started of the horse slaughterhouses that are participating in the Respectful Life project. This monitoring was continued in 2022 and 2023.

The focus of the project is horse welfare, and in particular in the slaughterhouse environment. The participating slaughterhouses in Argentina, Uruguay and Canada therefore gave the Animal & Welfare research group at KU Leuven access to the online monitoring of camera images at the slaughterhouse sites.

The various horse slaughterhouses were monitored at various times (which were unannounced). The monitoring took place by means of visual online observations via streamed camera images. The findings were analysed in terms of animal welfare and the animal-friendly treatment of horses. For each monitoring session, a short follow-up report was sent to the slaughterhouse setting out and explaining these findings and observations, and any points for improvement or points requiring attention were listed.

This report provides an overview of the main points requiring attention. It thus presents findings from the monitoring of the horse slaughterhouses in Argentina, Uruguay and Canada.

In the period July 2022 to December 2023, a total of more than 500 hours of footage was monitored and analysed.

The online monitoring was conducted by Jos Van Thielen of the Animal & Welfare research group, who has many years of experience in the field of animal welfare and behaviour, and more specifically in relation to the monitoring of animals during their transport to and time spent in slaughterhouses.

The screening was conducted, animal welfare assessed and recommendations made in complete objectivity and independence.

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1 Participating companies

The camera images available to the author of this report were monitored via online streaming at various unannounced times, followed up and assessed in terms of animal welfare.

The online monitoring took place during the period between 1 July 2022 and 31 December 2023.

The participating companies are listed here in alphabetical order:

- Bouvry slaughterhouse in Fort Macleod – Canada
- Infriba SA slaughterhouse in Batán – Argentina
- Lamar slaughterhouse in Mercedes – Argentina
- Sarel SA slaughterhouse in Montevideo – Uruguay

2 Objective

The objective was to set up a continuous online monitoring system for animal welfare in which the participating slaughterhouses undergo unannounced monthly monitoring. In addition, the intention was to provide prompt feedback if a negative situation in terms of animal welfare and the handling of the horses was observed.

3 Camera infrastructure

The camera images available to the author of this report were monitored via online streaming at various unannounced times, followed up and assessed in terms of animal welfare.

This camera monitoring does not replace site visits, but is an addition to the periodic monitoring visits to the various horse slaughterhouses participating in the Respectful Life project. By means of camera monitoring, an analysis was conducted of the treatment and handling of the horses to be slaughtered, on the basis of 5 degrees of freedom.

The set-up of the cameras allows the observer to form a good image of how the horses are treated and handled. The staff on the floor were not affected in their actions by the fact that they are being monitored at that point, since the monitoring occurred at random times without being announced.

With a sufficient number of well-positioned cameras, it is possible to follow the entire process (from the waiting area to the shoot box).

It is important that all potentially critical points receive clear online coverage.

The following locations/activities are filmed fairly clearly:

- The unloading quay, the unloading of the truck and the driving of the horses to the waiting area
- The waiting area
- The corridor down which the horses are driven and the process of driving them to the restraint/stunning box
- The stunning box and stunning process
- The room where the horse comes out of the stunning box and has its throat cut

One limitation of this method is, however, that only visual data can be picked up (both the way in which the staff handle the horses and the behaviour and reactions of the animals). Sounds and other environmental parameters cannot be picked up via the streaming, and therefore cannot be included in this analysis. Despite this, this method allows a good assessment to be made of animal welfare in the slaughterhouse at that time.

The quality of the internet connection is also very important for this method. The streamed images must be fast and fluid.

The different slaughterhouses do not all use the same software program for online monitoring of camera images.

To make smooth, practical online monitoring possible in a technically efficient manner, a single uniform system should be chosen.

4 General findings and recommendations

A number of findings can be formulated from the analysis of the monitoring of the different slaughterhouses.

The intention must always be to handle the horses in an animal-friendly manner. Where this is done correctly, with respect for the signals given by the animals at the time and in accordance with the natural behaviour of the horses, their handling will be efficient and smooth. Here are a few points requiring attention that are important for animal-friendly handling of horses in a slaughterhouse environment:

- It is important for the confidence and calmness of the horses that they do not slip in the corridor and/or restraint box. If this happens, the horse becomes anxious and its stress level increases.
- Be aware of the impact on the horses of the use of a driving aid. Driving aids must be used correctly. Avoid giving misleading or contradictory signals to the horses, and take account of horses' natural behaviour.
- It is best to drive the horses from the waiting area towards the entrance to the restraint box in small groups. If the group is too large, it cannot be kept under control and the horses then start circling around.
- It is desirable for anyone within the live horses' field of vision not to wear white clothing, as this can make the horses nervous.
- A horse that is driven into the restraint box must be stunned immediately. If this cannot take place immediately for certain reasons, the horse must be released from the restraint box so that it has contact with its fellow horses again.
- The operator of the shoot box must work in a very concentrated manner and ensure that the bolt gun is correctly positioned on the horse's forehead. The use of a head restraint is recommended.

Summary and conclusion

During the online camera monitoring of the various slaughterhouses, the author of this report did not observe any significant infringements of animal welfare. Points for improvement were communicated in a follow-up report after each monitoring session.

The method using camera streaming at unannounced times is a good and objective way to assess daily operations as regards the handling of the horses and the animal-friendly way in which this is done. It is a time-consuming method, however, because it requires many hours of online camera monitoring.

For both the quality assurance of the RL project and the ongoing monitoring and provision of recommendations on animal welfare to the slaughterhouses and the staff concerned, this method is a good supplement to the physical, periodic site monitoring visits.

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Disclaimer:

The Animal & Welfare group accepts no responsibility for any damage resulting from the implementation of the recommendations provided in this report.

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