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Left behind

Economic downturn leaves domestic animals stranded and hungry

By [Josh Kulla](#)

In a deepening economic slump, one group of local residents is feeling the pinch harder than most others: the four-legged kind.

With the United States officially in a recession for the past year, a growing number of local residents are finding themselves forced into a financial corner. As a result, a worsening toll of horses, cats, dogs and other animals are finding themselves abandoned by their owners across Oregon.

Clackamas County provides a good case study for this growing phenomenon, in part because of its large horse population, the state's largest on a per capita basis.

Wendy Hein, an Oregon State University Extension agent who works with numerous 4-H horse clubs in the county, said animal abandonment has jumped over the past several years, and even more in recent months. And unless the economy changes for the better, Hein said, rising feed, transportation and boarding costs will likely combine to worsen the current situation.

"Yes, there has been more abandonment in the last couple of years," she said. "There are a few rescues out there, but a lot of them are full, and they take the horses most in need, commonly because their owners, before giving up their horses, they get to the point where they can't feed their horse appropriately and their care suffers."

Molalla residents learned about the problem firsthand when 11 starving and abandoned horses



Photo By Josh Kulla

See the Cat Adoption Team, [Clackamas County Dog Services](#), [Oregon Humane Society](#), [HyTyme Equine Rescue](#), [OSU Clackamas County Extension Services](#), and [Unwanted Horse Coalition](#).

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were found in the woods outside the city this fall. Six were sold at the Woodburn Auction Yard, while five others are being housed at the Oregon Humane Society's Duchess Sanctuary in Douglas County.

An Eagle Creek woman also was charged in a similar case last February, and a 27-year-old Clackamas County resident was arrested just last month on a charge of animal neglect after police and Humane Society personnel found four starving horses, three dead calves and other neglected livestock and domestic animals.

That's just the tip of the iceberg, said Jim Elliot, president of HyTyme, an equine rescue operation based in Eagle Creek.

Elliot says the situation is now so bad that horses which once would have been sold to buyers in Mexico and Canada for slaughter through the Woodburn livestock auction are now simply being euthanized if homes for them cannot be found. Demand for horse meat, considered a delicacy in some countries, is falling along with the global economy.

More locally, an already makeshift system of private and public animal shelters and rescue services already is overtaxed. This means that abandonment of horses and other animals is not likely to recede anytime soon. Spiraling feed costs make things worse.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is, things are bad now, but are going to get much worse," Elliot said. "Now is not good times for horses. They are in real trouble."

The December arrest of yet another Molalla-area resident on charges of animal neglect and abandonment also made headlines, as Clackamas County Sheriff's Office livestock deputy Morgan Guthner, along with Oregon Human Society staff members, seized four horses, three pigs and several other domestic animals. Seven calves were also found dead in squalid conditions.

Guthner, whose primary job is to enforce crimes against animals, told the Spokesman that despite high-profile cases like these, he hasn't seen a noticeable increase in abandonment.

"It's about the same as it's always been for me," Guthner said. "The economy is not as good as it's been in the past, but I can only act on what's reported to me, so I don't necessarily see an increase.

"You'd think that that would happen, but it hasn't happened to a noticeable degree."

Like Elliot, Guthner said the elimination of American slaughterhouses, while humane, has had the unintended effect of increasing abandonment.

"The problem is there is no real solution to the problem now," Guthner said. "It really started when the horse slaughter went away. Now they have 100,000 horses a year with nowhere to go. The majority now go down to Mexico, and they get shipped to Europe.

"But is the (other) solution that they starve to death in people's backyards?"

Guthner said he tries to direct people to outside organizations if they are having trouble making ends meet.

"When it comes to animals, people get emotional," he said. "People can't stand it (abandonment) and I try to direct them to organizations."

Some friend

Being domesticated doesn't mean respite from the current storm.

Even dogs and cats are falling victim to the economy, as pet owners who find themselves out of work or even homeless are forced to make drastic choices.

According to Diana Hallmark, general manager of Clackamas County Dog Services, the county dog shelter saw a sharp increase in November in the number of people attempting to leave their pet with the shelter.

At least six so-called "owner surrender" cases have come to her attention at a facility dealing almost exclusively with stray animals. This makes it very difficult for the shelter to accept surrendered pets.

"We've started seeing a bit of an uptick in owners coming to us with dogs they can't afford to keep anymore," Hallmark said. "It's very difficult for the owners and very difficult for the dogs."

Kathy Covey, director of media relations for the Sherwood-based Cat Adoption Team, said her organization is seeing much the same thing with regard to domestic cats.

"Since the beginning of the year, through the end of November, we've had 33 cats dumped here at the shelter and 18 cats dumped at our PetSmart adoption outreach partners," she said. "A lot of times, they're left in the parking lot or left under a car."

With its resources, CAT has been able to find homes for all 33, Covey said.

She also noted that many pet owners are reluctant to own up to the fact they are unable to care for their animals. This leads to surreptitious dumping of pets instead of turning them over to a reputable shelter.

"It's an unfortunate thing," Covey said. "If people would own up to the fact that they can't keep their animals, it's much better to say 'I can't keep this animal.' We don't judge people. It's about what's best for the animals."

Abandoned animals, even if rescued, also don't come with medical, family or behavioral records, all of which are valuable in adopting a pet.

It (dumping) really doesn't help the animal and it doesn't help us," Covey said.

Hallmark said the county dog shelter is typically full, although adoptions there help free up space. She also encourages people to seek outside help in keeping their pets, if possible,

"There is just no room at the inn, so to speak," she said. "Quite often, that's a very difficult situation, and people don't always want to tell us what's going on."

"When the economy takes a downturn, pets also become part of the issue. And, unfortunately, pets are a part of the family. It's an across-the-board sad situation."

[Go to top.](#)

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