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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3101

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COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
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AND NUTRITION
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COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
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NATIONAL SECURITY

www.lujangrisham.house.gov

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I write to express my concern about reports that inspectors with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are recommending that a grant of inspection for equine slaughter be issued to Valley Meat Co. in Roswell, New Mexico. It saddens me that thousands of horses, a majestic fixture of the American West, could be methodically and inhumanely put to death in my home state. But even without considering the cruelty of horse slaughter as a practice, I have serious concerns about Valley Meat's fitness to run this facility. After reviewing evidence about the company's owner and its previous history of violations, I believe that a grant of inspection for Valley Meat could endanger public health and safety.

As part of its application for federal inspection, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) asks applicants to list any felony convictions, and to certify that all statements made on the application are true. Applicants are also warned that individuals making false statements are subject to a \$10,000 fine or up to five years in prison. The owner of Valley Meat, Ricardo De Los Santos, has filed three such applications for horse slaughter. On two of the three applications, Mr. De Los Santos did not disclose any felony convictions. On the third and most recent application, he stated, correctly, that he had been convicted of burglary and criminal trespass, both felonies. Under the law, you are permitted to refuse inspection service to any applicant that has been convicted of a felony. As you know, Mr. De Los Santos has been convicted of two felonies, and has failed to disclose these convictions in an application for a grant of inspection.

In addition to its owner's criminal activity, Valley Meat has a shameful record of health, safety, and environmental violations. As recently as 2012, the USDA issued a notice of suspension of inspections to this same plant, operating as a cattle processing facility, for

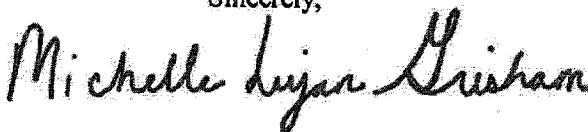
violating requirements for the humane handling of animals. This notice was the fourth issued to this facility over a three year period, and the second related to humane handling. The facility's other violations ranged from inadequate E. coli testing to pest control issues.

Valley Meat's health and safety violations alone are cause for concern, but its environmental record is equally troubling. The facility was cited by the New Mexico Environment Department for multiple violations over a nine year period, the worst of which initially resulted in an \$86,400 fine. This particularly disturbing violation involved the discovery of a large pile of dead, rotting cattle that caused a federal inspector to raise concerns about Specified Risk Materials leaching through the soil and into feedstuffs, potentially leading to the development of Mad Cow Disease.

Further, this application comes at a time of heightened public awareness. Recent events in Europe have raised concerns about labeling and toxicity, issues of extreme importance to American consumers. As the USDA considers granting inspection to the first horse meat processing plant in the U.S. in several years, the Department must ensure it sets a high standard for quality and safety. Unfortunately, Valley Meat's past behavior suggests that it does not adhere to such a standard and is not the industry leader that would serve as a model of best practices.

While I am very concerned about this particular case, I recognize the Administration's efforts to ensure public safety on this issue overall. I appreciate the Administration's support for budget language restricting the inspection of horse slaughter facilities, and I am encouraged by your comments indicating a desire to find a "third way" to address this issue. I will continue to work with my colleagues in Congress toward imposing a federal ban on horse slaughter. I believe that the offenses listed above, including felonies committed by the company's owner, his character and moral turpitude, incidents of animal cruelty, and environmental violations, allow you to reject Valley Meat's application for a grant of inspection under 21 U.S.C. § 671, and I encourage you to exercise your authority to do so. I would also ask that you notify me when a decision is made on this application.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michelle Lujan Grisham". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Michelle Lujan Grisham