



Friday 8 May 2009

Horse Traders Found Guilty Of Animal Neglect On A Massive Scale

A family of horse traders was today (Friday) found guilty of animal neglect at their Buckinghamshire farm.

James John Gray (aged 45) and his son James Gray junior (16) were found guilty of causing unnecessary suffering to 40 equines after a 12-week trial, brought by the RSPCA.

Along with wife Julie Gray (41) and daughters Jodie Gray (26) and Cordelia Gray (20) they were also found guilty of failing to meet the welfare needs of 114 equines.

The investigation has been one of the RSPCA's biggest ever, and just providing care and rehabilitation treatment for the horses has cost the charity over £850,000.

Bicester Magistrates Court heard how the family were prosecuted after RSPCA inspectors discovered more than 100 horses, ponies and donkeys and the bodies of a further 32 equines at Spindle Farm near Amersham between Friday 4 and Wednesday 9 January 2008.

Officers from World Horse Welfare, Redwings Horse Sanctuary, vets and Thames Valley Police worked alongside the RSPCA in very difficult conditions to rescue the surviving animals from the terrible scene.

Witnesses described how many of the animals had little food or dry bedding and were crammed into pens which were ankle-deep in their own faeces. Other horses had simply been left to die where they fell and then, surrounded by their companions, decomposed. In one pen, the bodies of two horses were found with nine live horses. Other carcasses were found in the yard. One extremely thin pony with a large sore on its side was lying by a water trough and had to be put to sleep after a vet concluded that it was dying.

Further carcasses were discovered in the surrounding fields, some burned on bonfires, and there was a pile of bones and a skull against an outbuilding. The horses living in the fields had very little grazing and the water they had was dirty.

RSPCA inspector Kirsty Hampton told the court that at times Mr Gray became aggressive towards those carrying out the examination and threatened to set a Rottweiler dog on them.

Eight vets examined the horses, ponies and donkeys for the prosecution and gave evidence at the trial. Senior equine vet Peter Green examined their evidence and appeared in court as an expert witness for the prosecution.

Mr Green said that 13 of the equines were starving and another was “starved to the point of collapse”. Six more animals had severe muscle wastage, caused by malnutrition and another had a respiratory condition, known as strangles, and was malnourished. A four-year-old heavily pregnant mare was emaciated and had such extreme diarrhoea that she had to be put to sleep. A donkey was found to be emaciated, and could not stand for two days after being removed to safety at the nearby Horse Trust. Another had starved to death.

Further animals had not received the necessary veterinary treatment for their medical problems.

RSPCA inspector Kirsty Hampton said: “This case was distressing beyond measure. What we were confronted with on arrival at the farm was grotesque. To see so many animals in such awful condition was overwhelming and those that had survived were shown little care or consideration. Many horses and ponies had just been left to starve, and the smell of rotting flesh was overpowering.”

All the defendants denied all counts of cruelty and neglect. In court, James Gray claimed sole responsibility for the animals, and said his wife and one of his daughters were “frightened” of horses. He said he ran a limited company dealing in 2,300-2,400 equines a year and, of these, “nine or ten” would die. He added that bad weather had been responsible for the wet bedding and “temporary” overcrowding when the RSPCA visited his farm in January 2008. He denied that the horses were poorly fed and housed.

The court also heard how, prior to this case, the RSPCA successfully prosecuted James Gray for causing unnecessary suffering to a horse. In October 2006 he was fined £3,500 and ordered to pay £7,871 in costs by Hemel Hempstead Magistrates Court. He was not disqualified by the court from keeping animals.

In respect of James Gray and James Gray Junior District Judge Andrew Vickers said in reaching the guilty verdict today: “Their failure to feed appropriately, water, care and treat when [horses were] ill is evidenced by such instances as dragging a horse, kicking it whilst on the ground and leaving it tied up on a trailer on a bag of food when it was emaciated. The carcasses were addressed by James Gray in evidence in a matter of fact manner as if he was dealing with a nuisance rather than a once living creature. They ought reasonably to have known that leaving the weak ones to go to the wall would cause suffering and it was easily preventable.”

In respect of Julie Gray, Jodie Gray, and Cordelia Gray he said: “They had custody and control because they were on their land, either being brought or taken off. This was a commercial activity, it made money for the family to live on Spindles Farm, it bought the motor vehicles, the holidays etc and the involvement of all defendants in some degree more than others is a matter for sentence as guilt has been established.”

RSPCA inspector Kirsty Hampton said: “The verdict shows that the court recognised the seriousness of the crime. Anyone keeping animals has a legal duty to provide them with, at the very least, food, clean water and shelter, and to protect them from injury and disease - something which should be obvious to a caring owner.”

“As a charity, we rely solely on the generosity of our supporters to continue our work,” said inspector Hampton. “The cost to the RSPCA of caring for the equines involved in this case over the past 16 months has now reached over three quarters of a million pounds.”

The animals remain the property of the Grays unless the court rules otherwise at sentencing. This means that the RSPCA cannot yet take enquiries on rehoming them.

However, if members of the public would like to contribute towards the work of the RSPCA and the animals in its care, they should call **0300 123 8000** or visit **www.rspca.org.uk/amershamhorses**.

“The operation to remove the animals to safety over a year ago was a difficult but successful joint effort between many animal welfare agencies and the police,” said inspector Hampton. “The RSPCA would like to thank them all - and in particular the Horse Trust, Redwings, and World Horse Welfare - for helping us provide ongoing care for the huge number of deprived horses, ponies and donkeys removed from Spindle Farm in January 2008.”

Sentencing is due to take place on 12 June, Aylesbury Magistrates’ Court, at 12pm.

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Notes to editors

All five defendants pleaded not guilty to a total of 12 charges each of neglect and cruelty under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. (One charge was dropped during the trial.)

James Gray, his wife Julie, son James Gray Junior and daughter Cordelia are from Spindle Farm, Hyde Heath, Amersham, Buckinghamshire. Cordelia’s sister, Jodie Gray is from Park Road, Ashford, Middlesex.

Photographs and video footage are available. For these, or to arrange interviews, please contact the RSPCA regional press officer on 0300 1234 8404, the national press office on 0300 123 0244 or email: press@rspca.org.uk.