

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) Animal Care Program will hold listening sessions throughout the United States to obtain public feedback on the Horse Protection Program. In particular, APHIS is interested in hearing feedback on the questions below:

- Congress passed the Horse Protection Act in 1970 to eliminate the cruel and inhumane practice of soring horses. How close are we to achieving the goal?

Not even close. At every step taken and not enforced by the USDA persons in this industry up their game to use more sophisticated methods both on Performance Show horses and Flatshod horses.

The industry itself does not have the will to resolve the issues of soring. I think if the USDA could enforce the HPA fairly and consistently while looking into the origins of the soring circumstances instead of the result we would move further, faster.

- Can the industry achieve a consensus on how to carry out a self-regulatory program to enforce the Horse Protection Act in a consistent way?

As it stands today, this industry, as it is commonly defined by the very people committing illegal acts, does not have the will or interest in stopping the willful acts of training sore horses for the show ring.

- What responsibilities should USDA-certified Horse Industry Organizations (HIOs) have within the industry?

I believe the HIOs should serve as educators to their affiliates. It is impossible for a HIO to license DQPs who have no personal knowledge of the exhibitors and horses that are being inspected. They often are the same DQPs that inspect the same horse over and over and if the horse passes the first, second and third time through inspection, it would reflect badly on a DQP to find a violation the fourth time.

- How can the industry reconcile its inherent competition aspect with ensuring compliance with the Horse Protection Act?

The only way I see that this can be done is to remove the reward for soring. Horses that place 1st-5th should exhibit a sound, natural 4 beat gait. Not the labored show gait that often wins ribbons. Judges must be held accountable for the placing they make, especially when they place a horse that appears to have been sored or trained with methods that would enhance the gait beyond the natural way of going.

Once the horse gets to the DQP inspection there should be no question that he will pass because there is no reward for deeper, higher, better gait. This is where I see the Breed organization is integral to the success of removing sore horses from the 1st place ties. Licensing judges that will not place a horse doing more in gait than the breed standard dictates. Each division of horses within the classes at the show should have a finely defined way of going that promotes the natural looseness and even gaits without emphasis on deeper, higher, bigger.

- What can USDA do now (and in the future) to ensure compliance?

The Government must pursue felony indictments of habitual violators. Remove those who are continually found in violation of the HPA by inspections.

Drug testing should be done on every horse entering the ring whether blood test or swabs.

The USDA should license and train equine veterinarians to inspect, if inspections at the show ring are to continue. Assign vet DQPS to regions not close to their normal geographic practice and rotate so that the Vet DQP does not check the same horses multiple times within the show season .

Remove or reduce the emphasis on the scar rule. Blatant scarring of a horse's pasterns could still be detected without splitting hairs. However, the more sophisticated trainers are well adept at removing, covering up, and hiding scar tissue so that the horse remains competitive.

Conduct unscheduled inspections of training barns, especially facilities specializing in training young horses. We must stop the perpetuation of the most egregious practices at the training level. Yearlings and 2 year olds , once trained to perform accentuated gaits will be the most likely to be the focus of training methods considered most abusive. Until APHIS is in a position to inspect training facilities just as any other livestock facility under their jurisdiction for abusive practices, we will never stop the ongoing abuse by soring. These young horses are the ones who will suffer the most abuse in their training to perform gaits beyond their physical capacities. Many young horses die in this early process, victims of colic, injuries, and shock. They never make it to the show ring to be inspected. They die from the training process, colic, or are badly maimed and sent out to be brood stock or trail mounts. Check the young horses in training for scars before they are removed with applications of acid and surgery.

- What responsibilities should USDA have within the industry with respect to enforcement and what hinders oversight of the HIOs and/or industry?

It is my opinion that this industry will never voluntarily give up the practices of soring. The USDA should be able to conduct routine unscheduled inspections of breeding barns, training barns, and show barns. Until the judges of TWH show horses are not themselves trainers, farriers, or have clients they service outside their judges duties, we will continue to reward excessive gait. enhanced by mechanical and artificial means.

- Should there be a prohibition of all action devices?

Action devices at the show are not in and of itself a problem. It is the stacks of heavy chains that are put on in the training barn. The 6 oz chain serves only to remind the horse of the pain in which he was trained. "Scare him" as I have heard some trainers say.

- Should there be a prohibition of pads?

The stacked shoes, or performance shoes, or padded shoes are not in and of themselves an issue, other than being a visible reminder of the training methods used to enhance the gait.

- Currently the Horse Protection regulations have a shoe weight limit on yearlings. Should there now be a shoe weight limit for all aged horses?

Yes, a weight limit on shoes is common in most other breeds that offer Park, or Enhanced gaited classes. The Breed organization should set a standard for classes based on manner of going instead of size and/or weight of shoes. The weight limits on yearling does not appear to apply to training under saddle. Again at the barns that start long yearlings, the youngster may start training as early as 14-16 months. By the time they arrive at a show they have already been subjected to months of torturous abuse.

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