The horse industry is today an important stakeholder in the European economy and has growing significance. The industry represents a 100 billion Euros a year economic impact and 400.000 full-time jobs equivalent.

The use of the horse for pleasure and work is an important part of European history, culture and future development both in rural and urban areas. The welfare and health status of the horse is therefore a major concern for the EU economy.
Equine health challenges
The equine industry is uniquely dependent on international trade. The high volume of international movements of horses and equine biological products for competition, breeding and sale creates a high risk of disease spread at local, national and international levels, threatening the economic viability of the industry as well as equine welfare. In contrast to the farming and small animal sectors, frequent movement is an essential feature of the equine industry and although the risks are partially mitigated through biosecurity programmes based on education and vaccination, the intrinsic structure of the equine industry creates significant health challenges.

Surveillance of ‘exotic’ (reportable/notifiable) infectious disease threats is conducted by all Member States, however endemic disease surveillance is generally not conducted. A common European system for equine endemic disease surveillance does not currently exist, which creates a significant gap in provision.

The welfare of the horse is heavily dependent on the adequate availability of licensed medicines. The horse is regarded as a minor species, and the economic value of the equine pharmaceutical sector is small compared to both farm and small animal sectors - factors that are limiting the commercial incentives to develop new medicines or maintain licensing for current medicines. Measures taken by the European Commission, Council and Parliament since 2005 have helped safeguard availability of equine medicines. However, significant threats remain, particularly in relation to medicines licensing. Although there are four different routes to obtaining a license, the majority of medicines are licensed through national, rather than through centralised, mutual recognition or decentralised procedures. The result is a lack of common European registration of medicines, with most having to be licensed in individual countries. ‘Off-label’ use of medicines in horses is therefore common, and is a problem affecting horse owners every time the veterinarian is called.
Equine research

Although the horse is technically a food producing species in Europe, the status of the horse has evolved towards a sport/leisure companion in the majority of Member States. In comparison to research projects focused on food production and public health, equine research projects have increasingly been judged of secondary importance and not competitive, because their impact is largely sector-specific.

Whilst equine research may be conducted as part of multi-species research in agricultural universities and institutions, dedicated equine research with meaningful group sizes is sparse and limited all over the region. Grants for species-specific equine research have become increasingly difficult to source, although there are a few examples of ring-fenced equine funds from sources such as the Swedish-Norwegian Foundation for Equine Research, the Horserace Betting Levy Board in the U.K. and a restricted number of equine welfare charities. Such sources of funding are, however, few in number and present in only a small number of Member States.

Consistent funding is requested for equine industry-specific research addressing four key strategic areas to maximise the benefits of the horse industry to the European Community:

1. **Rural economic development**
   - Research to improve the quality, usefulness, health and welfare of horses to maximise their contribution to the rural economy

2. **Value to society**
   - Social science and economic/business development research to maximise the cultural and recreational impacts of the horse industry and generate societal goods

3. **Sustainability of the equine sector**
   - Disease control through disease surveillance research and prevention of antimicrobial resistance

4. **Equine food security and resilience**
   - Equine food chain surveillance research, medication control; also related issues of transport welfare
The equine sector is at the intersection of major societal challenges and can address climate change, sustainable agriculture, rural development and health and well-being. All themes and key areas are high on the agenda of Europe 2020 and its research programme Horizon 2020, as well as its Regional Development programme for after 2014.

Thus far, research on animal breeding and health has been addressed mainly through food security objectives. The priorities would clearly be far more extensive if Europe looks for sustainable rural activities with diversification and non-food activities and well-being services, an increase in animal welfare, and promotion of a low carbon economy.

The Horizon 2020 programme states: “Genetic improvement of animals for productivity traits will call for appropriate conventional and modern breeding approaches and for a better use of genetic resources. Animal health will be promoted and integrated disease/pest control measures will be further developed. Strategies for the eradication of animal diseases including zoonoses will be tackled along with research on antimicrobial resistance. Studying the effects of practices on animal welfare will help meet societal concerns.”

The equine sector should also look for support in the proposed Regulation for future European Regional Development Funds. In 2014, the EU will promote research and innovation and small companies at local level with a territorial cooperation goal. In horse research, productive investments as well as investments in infrastructures and equipments are needed particularly in rural areas where 25% of the funding should be spent.

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