

Horses for Growth and Environment

A briefing by the European Horse Network

May 2015



Horse breeding and other activities involving horses meet the ongoing reforms and policies of the EU, 'greening' the CAP, developing environmentally sustainable projects and supporting rural development and employment.

Looking to the future and considering ongoing changes in society and economic challenges, the horse has still got a great deal to offer and provides opportunities that could benefit both animals and people.

Horses meet the objectives of 'greening' CAP

The latest reform of the Common Agriculture Policy focusses on the need to balance agriculture with environmental and rural development. Horse breeding is a non intensive, land protective and landscape conservation activity. Although horses are the smallest group of farm animals, the breeding activity for the 7 million horses (86 million beef/veal animals) is the one with the least adverse impact on nature and presents many opportunities for rural employment.

The horses' digestive system does not thoroughly degrade the vegetation they eat. As a result they tend to pass forage containing undigested seeds through their system onto the pasture. This unique digestive system assists in the building up of the absorptive, nutrient-rich humus component of soils. It is well known that the biodiversity of grasslands is improved by extensive grazing of horses. It is also recognised that horsemeat produced for human consumption is healthier than other meat.

Moreover, the working horse is a remarkable source of renewable energy since the draught horse produces its own replacement, something that tractors cannot do. Better still, a horse can be bred and fed locally, using locally-produced sources of renewable energy: grasses and cereals. Its pulling power is converted solar energy, and compared to a fossil fuel-driven engine and to cattle, the horse produces only a very small amount of green-house gases: no carbon dioxide and little methane.



An economic and ecologic alternate for agriculture, market-gardening, vineyards

The total number of working horses in the EU is estimated at about 1 million, most of them being used in Central and Eastern EU-countries. However, working horses are making a come-back in the western and northern part of Europe. The horse is now being seen as an example of efficient, modern and sustainable technology.

The size of nearly 11 million small farms in the EU lies below five hectares and in 9 EU-member states the average size of the farms is below ten hectares. Many of these holdings could benefit from sustainable ecofriendly and organic agriculture by using working animals. Recent Swedish studies show that biodiversity is significantly higher on small organic farms than on large ones and that a self-sufficient small farm of 11.5 ha of arable land including meadows could feed 65 people by using a draught horse.

There is a real renaissance of the working horse in vineyards, for instance, in France. High quality estates such as Château Latour or Romanée Conti replace tractors by horses, with remarkable results: young vines growing in a vineyard worked only with horses start to fruit one or even two years earlier than those growing in soils compacted by tractors. The roots of the vines go deeper, the soil structure regenerates, the water balance is improved and the biodiversity of soil organisms is increased.



Photo by Jean-Léo DUGAST

Animal energy can be adapted to the job to be done: horses can be used as single animals, as pairs or larger hitches, depending on the traction power needed. On a small holding needing 800 litres of diesel a year one working horse can reduce this demand to 320 litres. Moreover, horses hooves do not destroy soil as tyres from tractors and do not cause compacted and sterile soil.

In sensitive areas or places where machines are not able or allowed to enter, working horses can perform in many different ways: bracken bashing and eradicating invasive bushes, in the management of river banks, transporting materials and goods in mountainous terrain, mowing on wetlands and assisting in logging.



Photo by Jean-Léo DUGAST

Horses are the best partners for green/slow tourism



Photo provided by EHN

leisure time and the environment. It has become one of the most important pillars of sustainable rural tourism. In France looking at statistics on equine jobs, equestrian tourism has increased significantly in the last few years representing one of the most important developments in the equine sector. Equestrian tourism in historic cities is well developed: Bruges, Vienna, Salzburg, Krakow, and Prague. In Bruges 13 licences have been delivered for carriages representing around 85 horses working every day (each horse is resting during 2 days after 8h work).

Beyond equestrian tourism, often in combination with agro-tourism, horses can contribute in different other ways to rural development by preserving or creating jobs for farriers, harness and machinery makers and veterinarians. They are partners in a system of reduced food miles with local production, processing, transport and marketing, ensuring social cohesion and preserving local products and cultural traditions.

In forty years, equestrian tourism has gone from being a marginal activity, to becoming an excellent means of gaining and retaining the

interest of a large number of horse riders and attracting the general public through the values that are linked to it: human relationships,

Horses in urban surroundings

Horses are also coming back to urban surroundings. Cities and communities are reintroducing working equids into their local services. Horses and donkeys are used to collect waste,

glass, paper etc., to bring children to school or to take tourists around, to draw lawn mowers, carry water for plants in recreation areas and for mounted guards. The number of French territorial communities relying on working horses passed from less than twenty in 2001 to more than 300 today. These animals eliminate the noise and exhaust emissions of vehicles and machines.



Photo by Jean-Léo DUGAST

Bringing children to school



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Horses for body, mind and soul

Equine mediation is a set of practices whose interventions can be therapeutic, social, educational, sporting, occupational or recreational.

The main practices are hippotherapy, remedial work with horses, riding as sport for those with disabilities, equine facilitated psychotherapy and development of personal and management skills.

The interaction between people and horses provides physical, mental, emotional and intellectual benefits. Horses complement the work of many

practitioners and psychotherapists. In France, 63% of the psychiatric institutes for children use equine assisted therapy.

Equicoaching is a new discipline designed for managers, executives and management committees. It gives each participant the tools to achieve a better understanding of themselves, to optimise communication, stress management and improve positivity in management in compliance with good company practices.



Horses and handicap

EHN and its Members

The EHN is a non-profit network composed of many equine organisations operating in Europe.

EFTBA - European Federation of Thoroughbred Breeders Associations,

FEI - International Equestrian Federation,

EEF - European Equestrian Federation,

EPMA - European Pari Mutuel Association,

Hippolia Cluster and Hippolia Foundation

FEIF – Icelandic Horses,
WBFSH – World federation of Sport horses Breeders,

HNS - Swedish Horse Council Foundation,

EMHF – European and Mediterranean Horseracing Federation ,

UET - European Trotting Union,

WHW - World Horse Welfare,

FECTU – European Draught Horse Federation.

ESSA – European State Studs Association.

CBC-BCP – Belgian Horse Confederation

Hippolis, National Equine Competence Association of Finland,

FEEVA - Federation of European Equine Veterinary Associations,

EEN - European Educational Network,

ETF - European Trainers Federation,

BETA - Equestrian Trade Association