

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT CONFERENCE ON EQUINE WELFARE



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Panellists



Julie Girling,
Member of the European Parliament



Christiane Kirketerp de Viron,
Consistency in Rural Development,
DG AGRI, European Commission



Roly Owers,
CEO,
World Horse Welfare



Hanfried Haring,
President,
European Equestrian Federation



Denis Simonin,
Policy Officer Animal Welfare,
DG SANTE, European Commission



Philippe De Backer,
Member of the European Parliament



Torbjorn Froysnes,
Head of the Brussels' office
Council of Europe

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The 21st October 2015 was a landmark day for equine welfare in Europe, with the first EU level conference on the welfare of horses, donkeys and mules. The conference, which was hosted by Julie Girling MEP along with Eurogroup for Animals and the European Horse Network, built on the conclusions of the ground-breaking report '*Removing the Blinkers: The health and welfare of European equidae in 2015*', which was published in June. The report, authored by World Horse Welfare and Eurogroup for Animals, is the first comprehensive attempt to map the scale of the EU equine sector, while also setting out the challenges affecting the equine industry.

Attendees, including civil servants, diplomats, politicians and representatives from NGOs gathered in the European Parliament complex in Brussels to hear that whilst the equine sector in Europe is vibrant and dynamic, generating over €100 billion per year and providing valuable employment opportunities throughout the rural economy, it is held back by a number of factors, each of which adversely impacts upon the welfare of the individual animals.

Moderated by Torbjørn Frøysnes (Head of the Brussels' office of the Council of Europe), the conference panel consisted of Julie Girling MEP, Roly Owers (Chief Executive of World Horse Welfare), Denis Simonin (DG SANTE, European Commission), Christiane Kirketerp de Viron (DG AGRI, European Commission), Hanfield Haring (President of the European Equestrian Federation) and Philippe De Backer MEP.

Opening Remarks

Julie Girling MEP began the conference by welcoming many of the conclusions of '*Removing the Blinkers*', and by stressing the importance of sharing knowledge and best practice to improve many of the welfare problems that are holding the sector back. She emphasised that such knowledge would help with consistency in the implementation

and enforcement of the existing body of legislation, which should not be added to at present, as to do so would run the risk of over-regulation. Mrs Girling also touched on her forthcoming Own Initiative Report, which will, if adopted by the European Parliament, formally ask the Commission for actions to promote the responsible ownership and care of equines – a need identified in the report.



Next, Roly Owers presented a summary of the report's conclusions, which demonstrated the diversity of the sector, the problems it faces, and the importance not only of the sector itself, but of the animals which sustain it. Mr Owers explained that the European Commission did not have enough information on equines to assess how EU policies impacted them, and the report sought to bridge that gap. What is now clear is that the equine sector is varied and valuable, yet there is a lack of consistency in the laws affecting equines across the EU, and this should be addressed.

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Mr Owers said that identification and traceability of each individual animal had to be the starting point for good equine welfare in Europe. Whilst important steps have been taken, most notably with the updated equine identification (Passport) Regulation, questions remain on the cross-border traceability of the animals involved, and over the number of equines actually registered.

Furthermore, Mr Owers outlined the importance of dissemination of knowledge relating to responsible ownership and care, and how this could help address a number of areas, such as concerns over biosecurity or poor welfare at the time of transportation, but stressed that Member States needed to take action too. In particular, given the importance of the sector to the rural



economy, more action was needed to prevent unfair advantages for those who side-line good welfare, and to encourage best practices.

From the Commission, Dr Simonin welcomed the report but noted that only two report recommendations were directed at the equine sector itself whilst the remainder were to the Commission. Mr. Owers commented that all report recommendations are intended to be carried forward by the sector but that Commission

action is still needed. Mr Simonin's colleague from the Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture, Ms Kirketerp de Viron, outlined the roles that rural development programmes have played, and can play, in fostering good equine welfare and aiding the rural economy. She stressed that the rural development programmes are open to any farm animals, and that the way to leverage these funds are via national networks, as it is at this level at which the funds are administered at which the projects are selected.

Lastly, Hanfield Haring from the European Equestrian Federation stated that the report is an accurate reflection of the equine sector as he recognises it, and that whilst he doesn't agree with all of the conclusions, he was very pleased with it overall. He noted that the size of the sector, and the many ways which equines are used makes it difficult to get accurate data, and that he is sure that there are many more equines than the 7 million estimated in the text. Mr Haring said that, in his opinion, the legislation is good, but the implementation is poor, particularly around equine identification.

Discussion

During the open discussion points relating to the following topics were raised:

- Identification and registration
- Food chain exclusion incl. labelling and slaughter
- Transport
- Responsible Ownership and Care

Former Chief Veterinary Officer, Pierre Naassens, who is now lobbying for the Belgian horsemeat industry asked about the provisions of the new Equine Passport Regulation, and asked, when Europe would have a central database. Furthermore, he said that when people are unable to feed

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their equines, it is better they end up in the food chain, and asked in regards to this about the lifetime exclusions, and whether this should be revisited.



Astrid Engelsen from the European Federation of Thoroughbred Breeders' Associations said that they were willing to assist as far as possible in regards to equine identification, particularly as the racing industry is highly self-regulated.

Ben Mayes, Vice President of the Federation of European Equine Veterinary Associations said that they are worried by the numbers of hidden equines, and especially for those who are travelling long distances en route to slaughter. Furthermore, he noted availability of euthanasia across the EU needs to be improved, and said that FEEVA is keen to help in this regard.

Responding, Denis Simonin said that the improved equine identification system, which will apply from 2016, should do a lot to help those equines which are currently hidden, but that no EU level system of identification is possible, and that instead we have to see how national systems can work together to provide proper traceability. Julie Girling added that it shouldn't be beyond Member States to ensure that national systems can communicate adequately, so that an equine can be properly traced when moving cross border. Roly Owers agreed, saying that with today's technology it should be possible for data to be accessible across

the EU, and that robust identification was the foundation of good equine health and welfare. He said all equines, not just those under the age of six should be microchipped.

Nancy de Briyne from the FVE said that such a report should be produced for other species too, and that it is important that prospective equine owners understand the implications of ownership, whilst Lois Lelanchon from the Humane Society International - Europe challenged that a relaxation of the rules around lifetime exclusions from the food chain would in any way improve equine welfare.

Michaela Minero from the Università degli Studi di Milano asked how knowledge can be spread on responsible ownership, and how can accurate data on welfare be captured, for example by using Animal Welfare Indicators, and Joe Moran from Eurogroup for Animals asked the panel why, when many agree that transport times should be lowered, was meat from equines excluded from the current rules on country of origin labelling.

Last to raise a question was James Murphy, Irish Farmers Association who said that it is unfair that third countries have such access to the EU market for horsemeat, at prices which disadvantage European-produced horsemeat, and that he would like the Commission to look at this.

Roly Owers agreed, that while there were given the findings of the report, that responsible ownership was fundamental to improving equine welfare and also recognised the range of views regarding what role horse slaughter could play in protecting equine welfare. Denis Simonin said that he had no idea why meat from equines was excluded from the rules on the country of origin labelling for fresh and frozen meat, but would look into the issue and respond afterwards. Dr Simonin also

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stressed the importance of the development of Animal Welfare Indicators, and said that they will provide crucial measures of welfare, the results of which could provide the basis for any future legislation.



Conclusions

Closing the conference, Philippe De Backer that the interests of the individual equid should be the starting point. Yet as equines have different values, dependent on their role and on their location, how they are treated varies from Member State to Member State. Furthermore, he noted that there is a huge degree of divergence in how the current legislation is applied across Europe, and that whilst many therefore want the EU institutions to act, they do not always have the tools to do so. He reminded the conference that responsibility for enforcement lies also with national and regional decision makers, and that it is important that they are pressed on this matter.

Overall, the report received widespread support, and it was agreed that the recommendations should now be prioritised by Eurogroup for Animals and the European Horse Network and taken forward together with the Commission.