

EHN POSITION ON THE UPCOMING REVISION OF THE EU LEGISLATION ON ANIMAL WELFARE – KEPT EQUIDAE WELFARE RULES



In the context of the revision of the European legislation on animal welfare, the European Commission is currently working on a proposal of regulation on animals kept for commercial purposes, which will amend rules of Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes.

The European Horse Network (EHN) would like to share its position about the keeping of Equidae and how the European legislation should improve their welfare throughout the EU.

General comments

Inclusion of Equidae in the scope of the upcoming regulation

Equidae are agricultural animals kept for a variety of purposes, including, but not limited to: sport, racing, leisure, tourism, breeding, therapy, and meat production. All Equidae are susceptible to changing their categories several times during their lifetime. Regardless of their activities, they all have common species-specific physiological and behavioural needs. Moreover, the regulatory provisions on the keeping and care of horses may differ between EU Member States.

The EHN calls to enhance the protection and the welfare of Equidae throughout the EU. **To ensure it, all Equidae must be included into the scope of the upcoming regulation of the keeping of animals bred for commercial purposes.**

The upcoming proposal should ensure that all Equidae within the Union are protected according to the five freedoms recognised by the WOAH:

- freedom from hunger, malnutrition and thirst
- freedom from fear and distress
- freedom from heat stress or physical discomfort
- freedom from pain, injury and disease
- freedom to express normal patterns of behaviour

Currently, research on animal welfare is moving from the 5 freedoms to the concept of Five Domains: (1) nutrition, (2) environment, (3) health, (4) behaviour and (5) mental state. Reflection on horse welfare should include animals' needs related to these Five Domains in requirements on keeping and housing.

Consideration of specificities of Equidae

EHN considers that the upcoming regulation must ensure that the specificities of horses, compared to other agricultural animals, must be taken into account. This would be possible with specific delegated and implementing regulations focused exclusively on Equidae.

Depending on equine activities, facilities, housing and transport conditions of horses can differ (leisure, sport, racing, work and all other possible activities). Requirements detailed in the upcoming legislation should take into account this diversity. Proposed rules must maintain or improve health and welfare and should not introduce unnecessarily expensive conditions that have little to no benefit for horses' welfare. The Commission should continue the dialogue with the equine industry to implement suitable and fair requirements and derogations

Request for a balanced regulation

Inclusion of Equidae in the scope of the regulation and more specific requirements on keeping would be an important lever to improve horse welfare throughout the EU. But in proposing more detailed requirements and clear and unambiguous provisions, the Commission should consider the economic balance for the equine sector. Implementation and adaptation need money and time. The cost and the schedule have to be taken into consideration to ensure that the new legislation will not threaten a strategic economic sector, but, rather, will be practical and not too onerous. Depending on provisions contained in the new regulation, **it may therefore be necessary to phase-in conditions that require a significant investment or change of approach for establishments created before the implementation of the new legislation.**

Importance of research and necessary dialogue with experts

EHN members consider that the European Union should develop research on equine welfare to improve existing knowledge. **Results of scientific studies and the opinion of experts (veterinarians, scientists, ethologists, behavior professionals, etc.) should be taken into account.**

In this position paper, EHN integrates results and conclusions from European and international organisations (e.g WOAH, FEEVA, International Society for Equitation Science, research on welfare, etc).



Specific requirements

In order to improve Equidae's welfare in the EU, the Commission should include provisions related to the following topics. A strong dialogue with the equine industry will be essential to ensure that new rules are suitable and realistic.

Access to water and food

Access to water and food are essential topics to ensure Equidae's welfare. Equidae drink 5 – 10% of their body weight daily. Moreover, a wholesome and sufficient diet is very important to maintain Equidae in good condition and to avoid malnutrition, poor condition or obesity.

Consequently:

- Equidae should have free and permanent access to clean and fresh water.
- Equidae should have access to roughage according to their individual needs.
- No Equidae should stay without eating forage for more than four hours regarding the negative impact it has on horse health and behaviour (i.e., continuous production of acid in the stomach, which can cause painful gastric ulcers).

Accommodation

In order to guarantee Equidae's welfare, housing systems should ensure basic needs of Equidae and not be harmful for the animals:

- Equidae are gregarious animals that need contact with conspecifics. Whenever possible, horse keepers should allow contact (physical or visual) with other Equidae.
- Equidae should be turned out, exercised or be able to move freely every day to express their natural behaviour.
- Permanent tethering as a housing system (e.g. tie-stalls system) should be discouraged and progressively phased out.

Depending on the housing systems, some recommendations can be made in terms of facilities

Indoor housing:

- Individual boxes or stables should fit the size of the horse so that the equine animal can lie down in natural, sternal and lateral position (i.e. with extended legs, neck and head), turn around and get up unimpeded, and stand in a natural position.
- In group housing systems the total floor area should allow free movement, sufficient access and space at feeding and watering stations, provide enough space so that one can escape in a case of conflict, and ensure a dry bedded area large enough to allow all Equidae to lie down undisturbed at the same time.
- The lying area for Equidae should be non-slippery and provided with an adequate amount of suitable bedding material to ensure a dry and comfortable resting area.

- Equidae need access to natural light.

Outdoor housing:

- The size of outdoor space must be adequate to the needs, number and the size of the equine animal.
- The animals shall be provided with sufficient shelter (natural or manmade) to accommodate all animals, especially when there are extreme weather conditions.
- Pastures and paddocks should be organised and well maintained to avoid injuries (fences, avoiding tethering).

Climate and environmental conditions

Horses should be protected against adverse weather conditions and possible predators as far as reasonably practicable (e.g. access to shelter).

The facilities and equipment used for the Equidae and the monitoring of animals should be fit for purpose and not harmful for the animals.

Training

People who are in charge of the keeping, use, handling or training of horses should have appropriate equine-specific knowledge, education, experience and skills. They need sound knowledge on the Five Domains and welfare indicators to guarantee welfare and protection of Equidae. These indicators should be integrated in all programmes of Initial education for professionals working with Equidae.

Personnel keeping or caring for the horse shall also have adequate knowledge to identify injury and illness symptoms/signs to respond more rapidly. This includes physical but also mental well-being.

Health : biosecurity, disease prevention, injury and illness treatment

Aspects related to biosecurity and disease prevention are detailed in Regulation (UE) 2016/429 about animal disease.

In a welfare perspective, Equidae keepers and owners shall ensure a good health status of the animal.

An equine animal that appears ill or injured should be given appropriate care without delay. If the equine animal does not rapidly respond to such care, a veterinarian should be called to examine and give appropriate treatment to the equine animal. Facilities for temporary isolation of ill or injured horses should always be available.

Routine husbandry

All Equidae should be regularly inspected. Some Equidae require enhanced surveillance (injured horses, new-born foals, mares in late pregnancy...).

- **Hoof care:** the hooves of an equine animal should be checked at regular intervals and trimmed at appropriate intervals by a qualified professional to maintain the hooves in good and healthy condition.
- **Dental care:** It is recommended to perform an oral examination including check of teeth by a qualified professional regularly. If necessary, corrected measures should be carried out by a qualified trained professional.
- **Endoparasite:** monitoring program: monitoring and targeted programs should be established according to advice from a veterinarian. Keepers should also adopt appropriate pasture or paddock management practices. Diagnosis before treatment is very important to fight against the resistance of endoparasites to dewormers.

End of Life

The European equine industry agrees on the fact that “all Equidae, being sentient beings, deserve to be cared for in a responsible way from birth to death”. Equidae welfare shall be protected even when animals are retired, the keeper’s responsibility does not cease and Equidae shall not be abandoned or neglected.

It should be noticed that the high percentage of horses signed out from the food chain in the EU may exacerbate the problem of unwanted horses.

Regarding this, EHN supports:

- Responsible breeding and ownership from birth to death to try to ensure that no horse ends up in a position where its welfare is compromised.
- **Euthanasia**, based on veterinary advice and when in the equine animal’s best interest, should be recognised as an acceptable and ethical option. Euthanasia by lethal injection must only be carried out by a veterinarian, whereas euthanasia by other methods should only be carried out by persons with appropriate skills, training and equipment. Euthanasia must be carried out as described in the FEEVA protocol for euthanasia of horses .
- **Slaughtering** as an acceptable end of life option with a strict implementation of Regulation 2016/429.

Behavioural assessment

Behavioural assessment is an important indicators of an equine animal’s mental and physical state. People who are in charge of keeping horses should pay attention to behavioural indicators as much as the physical health of the animal to assess well-being.

Equidae need to express their species-specific behaviour. Observers can notice positive signs of welfare such as self- / mutual-grooming and friendly interactions whereas abnormal behaviours such as frequent aggression, disinterest in the surroundings or stereotypic behaviours are a clear sign of poor welfare.

When negative behavioural indicators are noticed, measures should be taken to identify the causes and put in place measures to improve the mental well-being of the animal.



Additional matters (e.g. breeding, training techniques, equipment)

The upcoming regulation shall ban all acts of cruelty and neglect of Equidae.

EHN also asks for a ban on **mutilations**, including some practices implemented by veterinarians with no benefit for Equidae's health (e.g. docked tail for "traditional" motivations).

Moreover, **neurectomy** should be mentioned in the SLID and the central database.

As Equidae are used for many purposes, people who are responsible for the animal should ensure that **training** does not start until the horse has reached a developmental stage where the horse is physically and mentally capable of performing the activities, limiting the risk of injury or distress in either the short or long term. No particular age can be set for this, as it will vary not only between and within breeds, but also according to the discipline, level and training intensity.

Regarding welfare of horses during training, **principles described by researchers of the International Society for Equitation Science should be taken into account by keepers, owners and trainers** :

- regard for human and horse safety
- regard for the nature of horses
- regard for horses' mental and sensory abilities
- regard for emotional states
- correct use of desensitisation methods
- correct use of operant conditioning
- correct use of classical conditioning
- correct use of shaping
- correct use of signals or cues
- regard for self-carriage

Equipment (saddles, bridles, etc.), used for the animal should be adequate to their age, species, physical conditions, etc. Equipment shall not be harmful to the animal, in order to prevent pain, discomfort and injuries. Equipment should be used regarding national and international federation rules.

Key figures on the European equine industry

7 million
Equines

6 million
Hectares of
grassland

800 000
People
employed

100 billion
€/year
Economic
Impact

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