

The Horse Protection Act

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) enforces the Horse Protection Act (HPA). The HPA is a Federal law that prohibits horses subjected to a practice called soring from participating in shows, sales, exhibitions, or auctions. The HPA also prohibits drivers from transporting sored horses to or from any of these events.

Soring

Soring is a cruel and abusive practice used to accentuate a horse's gait. It may be accomplished by irritating or blistering a horse's forelegs through the injection or application of chemicals or mechanical irritants. Sored horses sometimes develop permanent scars in the pastern area due to the use of these painful chemicals. The accentuated gait may also be accomplished using inhumane hoof trimming or pressure-shoeing techniques. When it walks, a sored horse responds by quickly lifting its front legs to relieve the pain.

In the 1950s, horse owners and trainers who wanted to improve their horses' chances to win at shows used soring as an unfair shortcut to the more conventional training methods. Because sored horses gained a competitive edge, the practice became popular and widespread in the 1960s. Public outcry over this abusive practice led to the Horse Protection Act, which was passed in 1970 and amended in 1976. The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is the USDA agency charged with enforcing the HPA.

The HPA ensures that responsible horse owners and trainers will not suffer unfair competition from those who sore their horses and that the horses will not be subjected to the cruel practice of soring.

Although the HPA covers all horse breeds, Tennessee walking horses, racking horses, and other high-stepping breeds are the most frequent victims of soring.

Responsibility

Responsibility for preventing sored horses from being exhibited, shown, or sold rests with owners, trainers, riders, sellers, and managers of these events. Owners and trainers may benefit if a horse wins a show or sells for a high price and therefore may have the greatest incentive to sore the horse.

Managers, however, have the major legal responsibility to exclude or disqualify sored horses at their shows, sales, auctions, or exhibitions.

Designated Qualified Persons

To facilitate enforcement of the HPA, APHIS established the Designated Qualified Person (DQP) program. DQPs are USDA-accredited veterinarians with equine experience, or they are farriers, horse trainers, or other knowledgeable horsemen who have been formally trained and licensed by USDA-certified horse industry organizations or associations. DQPs are hired by the managers of a show or sale to assure that sored horses are not allowed in the ring.

DQPs are responsible for physically inspecting every Tennessee walking horse and racking horse before they may be shown, exhibited, or sold. They must report any horses that do not meet Federal regulations under the HPA to show management. It is show management's legal responsibility to disqualify sored horses before awarding prizes and before customers view horses at sales or auctions.

Monitoring DQPs and Enforcing the HPA

APHIS inspection teams attend some horse events to conduct unannounced inspections. The APHIS inspection team may include veterinary medical officers (VMOs), animal care inspectors, and investigators. The VMOs observe horses during a show and may examine any horse for signs of soring or other violations of Federal regulations. The VMOs also evaluate the DQP's inspection procedure. A DQP may have his or her license canceled if his or her inspection procedures do not meet HPA standards.

Signs of Soring

The examination for soring consists of three components: an evaluation of the horse's movement, observation of the horse's appearance during the inspection, and physical examination of the horse's forelegs from the knee to the hoof. Particular attention is paid to the area of the coronet band, the anterior pastern areas, the "pocket" of the posterior pastern area, and the bulb of the heel; these are all favorite places for chemical soring. The horse may exhibit abnormal tissue damage, swelling, pain, abrasions, or oozing of blood or serum. Inspectors also measure for proper shoeing conformations and look for training devices that are too heavy or improperly applied. Heavy, rigid devices banging on the pastern during repeated workouts can cause soring.

Penalties

Criminal or civil charges can be brought against violators. If convicted, criminal violators can spend up to 2 years in prison and receive penalties of up to \$5,000. Civil complaints, imposed through administrative procedures, can result in disqualifications of one or more years and penalties of up to \$2,000 or more per violation. Disqualified persons may only attend horse events as spectators. They are not allowed to participate in any other fashion.

Additional Information:

For more information, please visit the Internet at this Web address: www.aphis.usda.gov/ac, or send an e-mail to ace@aphis.usda.gov. People can also contact one of the offices below.

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