

The AHC's 'Welfare of the Horse' National Issues Forum

Responsible Ownership

BY TOM LAMARRA

When it comes to horse lovers, logic sometimes gets lost in emotion. Such is the case in many a relationship.

"It's all about emotion, but there are responsibilities if you do it," Dr. Scott Palmer said.

So what will the horse industry in the United States do about the 80,000-150,000 equines considered "unwanted" because of issues with the horses themselves or their owners? A strategy is in place, but it could take a long time to implement.

The "Welfare of the Horse" was the topic for this year's American Horse Council National Issues Forum, held June 16 in Washington, D.C. For more than six hours, representatives of various equine groups told their stories and outlined steps they're taking to foster responsible horse ownership and after-care for horses no longer considered useful.

AHC president Jay Hickey called the forum "the most inclusive program on horse safety and welfare" ever held. Indeed, it was the first time industry segments such as horse racing and carriage horses compared notes publicly.

The groups discovered they have a lot in common when it comes to the welfare and safety of horses. The steps racing is



taking have been well-documented, but many may not know how well the carriage-horse industry is regulated.

"We're at the forefront of animal welfare," said Tommy Doyle, president of the Carriage Operators of North America. "We're out there 365 days a year."

Doyle is a second-generation carriage operator whose family has about 40 horses and 90 employees in Charleston, S.C., where carriage rides per year number about 250,000. The city has an equine welfare policy that requires regular veterinary checks and use of microchips for horses, Doyle said.

Horses can't work more than eight hours per day, and their temperatures are taken after every tour. On days hotter than 98 degrees, the carriage rides are suspended. The horses are turned out every four months.

"The system we have in place is 100% effective," Doyle said.

Doyle said caring for horses is second nature in his family. Still, public perception and potential attacks by animal-rights activists call for a plan and documentation.

Laura Hayes of the American En-



Dr. Douglas Corey

Communication Key in Equine Issues

Cindy Schonholtz, chair of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association Animal Welfare Council, said it's key to have a welfare and safety plan in place, have the "right person speak" when questions are asked, and have the facts.

"A written statement is worth its weight in gold," Schonholtz said June 16 during the American Horse Council National Issues Forum. "How many of us have been misquoted?"

Schonholtz said animal-rights activists' strategy is to "divide and conquer" by using "sensational media," undercover investigations, messages that target children, and the legal system. Violence is a possibility, she said.

"The whole (equine) industry needs to consider security plans before you're targeted," Schonholtz said.

Dr. Gail Golab, who heads the American Veterinary Medical Association Animal Welfare Division, said the question of who's right isn't a new problem for any industry tied to animals. She said groups have a responsibility to help others make good decisions, ask the right questions, prepare to defend their positions, and change when change is needed.

Science informs decisions, but people make decisions, she said.

"You have to communicate with so many different people," Golab



Dr. Gail Golab



Dr. Jim Morehead

said. "I probably have a callus on my tongue at this point."

The Thoroughbred industry in recent years has found out just how intense public scrutiny can be in the wake of high-profile breakdowns in major races. Last year the National Thoroughbred Racing Association launched its Safety and Integrity Alliance, which is charged with accrediting racetracks that implement a code of standards.

"The media is driving a society very much more concerned with animal welfare," NTRA president and chief executive officer Alex Waldrop said.

The United States Trotting Association, which oversees the Standardbred breed registry and also seeks to promote the sport, is dealing with similar issues in harness racing. States have adopted tougher whipping rules for racing, stallion books have been limited,

and equine retirement programs are expanding, USTA executive director Mike Tanner said.

"In a lot of cases, perception is as important, or more important, than reality," Tanner said of the challenges facing the equine industry.

Said Dr. Jim Morehead of the American Association of Equine Practitioners: "The world is watching; we're not in a bubble."

By Tom LaMarra



ANNIE M. EBERHARDT

durance Ride Conference said endurance horses must meet certain heart-rate parameters, undergo complete vet exams and soundness checks, and can't compete if it is determined they are lame. The discipline even has a drug-testing program with a zero-tolerance policy, she said.

Equine fatalities are reported voluntarily, but of 40 cases, only one horse owner chose not to participate. All fatalities are investigated, and the results made public, Hayes said.

"The AERC believes in transparency," she said.

Dr. Douglas Corey of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association said the organization has a livestock welfare program and recently added livestock welfare field representatives that monitor activities at events. The PRCA conducts regular surveys to identify areas for improvement and to monitor compliance with regulations.

Rodeos can be ripe for criticism by animal-rights activists, so the PRCA has a program called "Born to Buck," which educates the public on the sport and explains how horses and bulls have a propensity to buck through inherited characteristics. Despite negative perceptions, Corey said the sport has an injury rate of .00046%.

"Change is good, but change is not always fast," Corey said. "It always seems to be a work in progress."

Ed Armstrong, director of clubs and tournaments for the United States Polo Association, said the organization had embraced change before a well-publicized incident earlier this year in which 21 horses died after receiving lethal doses of selenium through a compounding supplement.



Ed Armstrong

The USPA also has equine welfare representatives to oversee tournaments and encourages public participation in the process.

"Anyone at the event is empowered to act on something they see," Armstrong said.

Penalties for equine abuse include one-year suspensions for riders. The 21-member Polo Pony Welfare Committee is addressing a medication policy, enforcement of rules, and adjudication for offenders in polo, Armstrong said.

"We don't want to do something in a knee-jerk fashion that becomes ineffective in only two weeks' time," he said.

Dr. Tom Lenz, who chairs the Unwanted Horse Coalition, said survey results indicate the public and the media don't understand the challenges involved in caring for horses. The data showed there are 432 equine rescue facilities in the U.S.,



Dr. Tom Lenz

What Other Breeds and Disciplines Are Doing for Equine Welfare

American Endurance Ride Conference

- Heart-rate parameters must be met
- Veterinary and soundness checks required
- Zero-tolerance drug policy

American Quarter Horse Association

- Supports Racing Medication and Testing Consortium
- Formed Animal Welfare Assurance Task Force
- Started "Greener Pastures" equine retirement program

Carriage Operators of North America

- Microchips and serviceability certificates issued by veterinarians are required
- Horses can work no more than eight hours per day
- Body temperature of horses taken after every carriage tour
- Animals don't perform if the temperature reaches a certain level, which varies by state

Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association

- Regular surveys to identify areas of improvement
- Monitor compliance with association regulations
- Staff events with livestock field representatives

United States Equestrian Foundation

- Drug-testing program established in 1969; laboratory opened in 1995
- Effective Dec. 1, 2009, all licensed competitions will require a safety coordinator
- Established funds for equine health research and disaster relief

United States Polo Association

- Equine welfare personnel attend all performances
- Formed Polo Pony Welfare Committee to examine and implement policies
- Assesses penalties for equine abuse

United States Trotting Association

- Supports Racing Medication and Testing Consortium
- Adopted whipping rules and limits on stallion books
- Expanding involvement in equine retirement programs

70% of them at or near capacity. The average facility has about 40 equine residents.

Lenz said people seek homes for about 18,000 horses a year; about 38% may be turned away. At adoption facilities, half of the horses find homes, but the others remain.

The coalition, which falls under the AHC umbrella, is designed to educate the public on responsible horse ownership, which includes preparing an exit strategy before horses are obtained.

"There is a tremendous amount of misinformation on unwanted horses," Lenz said.

Palmer, who owns the New Jersey Equine Clinic, said the statistics can't be ignored. Palmer noted it would cost about \$18.6 million a year to euthanize unwanted horses and about \$234 million a year to take care of them.

"I don't care if you like it politically—these are facts that we have to deal with," he said. "Somewhere down the road, we're going to have to euthanize more horses to make this work."

Palmer said it's not uncommon to spend about \$15,000 a year to keep a horse, and that's one that doesn't compete.

"It's time for a welfare audit," said Palmer, who gave the forum's keynote address. "This is not a unique problem to any one segment of the industry. We don't get a pass on this. The horse is going to pick up the tab." 🐾