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Our News Home Page

Sound Horse Conference Challenges Industry

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

by Christy Howard Parsons

(Editor's Note: The Report attended the 2008 Sound Horse Conference to provide our readers with a factual account of the statements made. This does not necessarily represent our opinion or that of other industry representatives in attendance.)

The first Sound Horse Conference was held April 11 and 12 in Columbus, Ohio. The conference was organized by Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH) and was cosponsored by FOSH and the Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders' and Exhibitors' Association (TWHBEA), American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP), American Horse Protection Association, Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and Ohio State University.

The conference was well organized with two full days of presentations from noted speakers. The audience was largely made up of sponsors and speakers on the agenda, with a smattering of lay people and press.

Representing the Middle Tennessee organizations, but not on any panels were David Pruett (president of TWHBEA), Stan Butt (executive director of TWHBEA), Dee Dee Sale (TWHBEA director), Link Webb (Walking Horse Trainers' Association president), Dr. Doyle Meadows (chief executive of the Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration (TWHNC)), Bill Hawks (AgWorks Solutions) and David Williams (breeding manager of Waterfall Farms).

FOSH President Lori Northrup opened the conference by clearly stating the goal, to come together in a productive, respectful atmosphere to work toward the end of soring of horses.

"We are all doing the best we can with what we know now, but we all have a lot to learn from each other. No one is intentionally cruel," initiated Northrup.

Northrup introduced an audio presentation that gave the history of soring and how it had developed within the breed. Video footage from the 2006 TWHNC Celebration was also shown, but Northrup was quick to point out that showing the animated gait did not imply soring. "All of these horses have passed an inspection to check for soring," she explained.

"There is no evidence that all horses are sored, but statistics overwhelmingly suggest that soring continues with over 800 Horse Protection Act (HPA) suspensions issued in 2007," she said. [It appears Northrup is including HIO suspensions as well as USDA suspensions in this number.]

Challenges To Compliance

The first panel of the session included Dr. Rachel Cezar and Mike Tuck from the USDA, Donna Benefield from the Horse Protection Commission (HPC) and Keith Dane from HSUS.

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After only one week, Joel Weaver has reclaimed the top spot in this week's Riders Cup standing.

▶ [Sound Horse Conference Challenges Industry](#)

The first Sound Horse Conference was held April 11 and 12 in Columbus, Ohio.

▶ [TWHBEA Is Now A Member Of ELCR](#)

The Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders' and Exhibitors' Association (TWHBEA), is excited to announce its new membership in the Equestrian Partnership Program of the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource.

▶ [Thank You Letter to WHOA](#)

I wanted to share with you the joy that children in my classroom are getting through your donation of extra ribbons that were not used at the International and other WHOA events.

▶ [TWHBEA Names Executive Director](#)

The Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders' and Exhibitors' Association (TWHBEA) announced today that effective immediately Stan Butt has been named as Executive Director.

▶ [TWHBEA Announces New Member Benefit](#)

The Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders' and Exhibitors' Association (TWHBEA) is pleased to announce that as of May 1, 2008 full adult memberships will include either a free foal registration or a free transfer.

THE PUBLIC POLL

Should the KY HIO sign the Operating Plan?

- yes
 no



Dr. Cezar presented an overview of the Horse Protection Act (HPA) and the examination procedures the USDA follows. She also presented eight 2007 pictures of scars illustrating granulomas and excessive loss of hair.

Cezar reported the USDA's major challenges in enforcing the HPA were monitoring the HIOs to ensure that they applied appropriate penalties, their lack of resources to attend more shows and the length of time it takes to get a case through the legal process.

Cezar was asked what it would take for an HIO to be decertified. "Since I have been there, I have not received enough information to decertify any HIO program. If I did, we would give a letter of warning, and they would either get better or be decertified," said Cezar.

A reporter from Equus magazine asked if any HIO had ever been given such a letter of warning. Mike Tuck indicated that to the best of his knowledge they had not, but Donna Benefield corrected Tuck and said that such a letter of warning had been sent.

Keith Dane of the HSUS concentrated his presentation on why the HPA had failed to completely end soring. "Congress intended for the HPA to end soring, not to regulate it, yet 38 years after the HPA was passed, soring persists," said Dane.

He said the reasons were cultural, financial and political.

Culturally, Dane claimed the industry was "addicted to the Big Lick gait," and HPA violators can still participate in the industry while they are on suspension. The United States Equestrian Foundation (USEF) bans suspended individuals who violate show rules from the show grounds of any sanctioned shows, yet the walking horse industry allows violators of federal law to be on the show grounds with horses in training while on suspension.

Dane also cited examples of HPA violators in positions of authority within the industry. He claimed there was no stigma associated with soring violations, primarily because there is no public knowledge of soring violators.

Financially, Dane claimed that some within the walking horse industry have too much at stake to want to change the status quo. He said some had used political connections to exert pressure on the USDA to "back off" from effective enforcement of the HPA. He claimed many believe the Tennessee Walking Horse breed will not continue and prosper without the big lick.

"We believe, they are selling their horse, and our breed, short," said Dane.

Politically, Dane cited the USDA's lack of funding and the cyclically erratic enforcement by the department on lobbyists and political influence being used against the USDA. Dane claimed USDA Veterinary Medical Officers had been "surgically removed" from the program due to industry complaints about overzealous enforcement efforts.

"The HPA has failed to end soring because the USDA has been forced to allow self-regulation, and industry self-regulation has failed to be an effective deterrent to soring," concluded Dane.

Dane identified state and local animal cruelty laws as an alternative to stop soring due to the USDA's ineffectiveness. He said the HSUS had begun with a \$10,000 reward program to identify cases that could be brought under the Tennessee Animal Cruelty Code. He said the HSUS had hired a private investigator in Tennessee to man the hotline and to investigate the findings.

Dane announced a new National Coalition to unite the independent sound horse organizations. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal, Animal Welfare Institute, American Horse Defense Fund, Humane Society of the United States, Friends of Sound Horses and Horse Protection Commission have signed on as a part of the Coalition.

To end soring, Dane suggested increasing rewards for breeding and training naturally gaited horses, offering courses to teach trainers how to train without soring, developing more sound show venues, focusing national media attention on soring, securing a congressional mandate for the USDA to enforce the Horse Protection Act and enforcing existing state laws against animal cruelty.

Donna Benefield began by stating, "Soring impacts the genetics of this horse, the economics of this industry and the future of this breed.

"If winners are artificially created through soring, people ultimately breed to the wrong horse. Horses that win are put up as breeding stock," she explained.

Benefield said that while lately there has been improvement in the show ring with judges excusing bad image horses, judges ultimately bear the responsibility of not rewarding the sore horse.

Benefield expressed that some trainers do not know how to train horses without soring, but that some are threatened by owners to "do what you have to do to win."

Benefield answered the claim that no one gives trainers credit for cleaning up the industry and that only two percent of the horses have a problem, by citing statistics regarding trainers leaving a horse show when USDA inspectors appear.

She claimed that 21 of 44 classes at a recent South Carolina show were cancelled after the USDA inspectors arrived.

She also questioned how the industry could claim to show major improvement every year and continue to report the same compliance rates. She argued that HIOs should report their violation rate based upon the number of horses at the show, rather than the number of entries.

Benefield criticized the USDA. "The USDA has become an enabler... refusing to decertify HIOs that don't comply because it would be political suicide," said Benefield.

Benefield detailed complicit activities to cover up soring. "Horses are cosmetically altered, given pain numbing agents, stewarded to be taught to inspect, hidden while decoy horses are taken through inspection and deemed unacceptable despite being pressure shod and only sent back to the barn," Benefield charged.

Benefield proposed solutions that include removing DQP licenses for failure to enforce the HPA, training trainers to train without soring, eliminating HPA violators from the Hall of Fame and other awards, passing new regulations to remove past violators from the inspection program and industry association leadership and publishing suspension information.

"Whether or not you think it is morally wrong, soring is against federal law. There has been a lack of desire to change for 30 years, and they sell this to the public by saying we've come a long way. Well, the more things change, the more they stay the same," concluded Benefield.

Pressure Shoeing

Benefield also served on the pressure shoeing panel along with two farriers and two veterinarians.

The forum identified the broad definition of pressure shoeing and detailed specific ways that a horse could be pressure shod. The panel also explained hoof testers and how they are used in detection, as well as observing the stance and locomotion of the horse. Thermography is also an aid in detecting pressure-shod horses.

Danvers Child, a farrier and managing editor of Professional Farrier magazine, claimed that he had done an informal survey of other farriers and concluded, "The good news is the general consensus says this is not happening as much anymore."

Child went on to say that there were still concerns regarding the angle of the coronet band (and therefore the coffin bone). "We need more education of the consumer and of the farrier," he explained.

Child explained the progression of farriers from technicians to professionals. "We need to educate ourselves and our consumers. We need to understand we are no longer technicians, but we are involved as part of a treatment community. We are working as part of a team to put the welfare of the horse at the forefront," said Child.

Dr. Steve O'Grady, a veterinarian and former farrier, was less enthusiastic about thermography, questioning its reliability and repeatability in an uncontrolled environment. He suggested digital radiography as a means of detection. "Digital radiography is really going to play a role. We can look where we never could before," said O'Grady.

O'Grady suggested farrier certificates be issued to owners/trainers of horses that documents who had shod each horse and when, and that penalties be implemented against guilty farriers.

Dr. Tracy Turner, the veterinarian who did the recent thermography study on walking horses for the USDA, agreed with O'Grady that conventional pressure shoeing is not as common. "That's passé. It's too easy to get caught. The new method is excessive trimming of the hoof wall to allow more sole contact. Any method of shoeing that causes inflammation is pressure shoeing," said Turner.

He disagreed with O'Grady however on thermography. "Thermography has 30 years of data that shows it is both repeatable and reliable," said Turner.

There was some discussion about the difficulty of pulling shoes to examine a horse's hoof. While there was some discussion that repeated pulling of shoes could be detrimental, it was generally felt that pulling shoes once in championships would be an adequate means of detection.

Bob Blackwell reported that Missouri Fox Trotters pull all their champion horses' shoes on the final night of the show. Donna Benefield reported that there were several breeds where pulling shoes is fairly routine.

The panel also recommended utilizing licensed American Farriers' Association farriers to ensure the most professional service.

TWHBEA President David Pruett asked if it was possible for a trainer to have done something to the hoof after the farrier left without detection. The farriers agreed that it might be difficult to prove whether a shoe had been tampered with, but Benefield answered that a bruise or bloodline on the foot would sometimes indicate if an object had been placed against the foot.

Child concluded the session by saying, "I feel compelled to stress that there are good practices affiliated with some of these productive materials that do not carry ill intent. Some have very useful purposes. I can use it to the advantage or disadvantage of the horse. It's the application, not the materials that are used."

Technology for Enforcement

Perhaps the most informative and educational part of the conference was the technology seminar.

Dr. Kevin Haussler explained the pressure algometer, a spring-loaded device that measures the pressure exerted for digital palpation in inspection. The device removes the subjectivity involved in how much pressure an examiner uses when palpating a horse.

Haussler studied active flat shod show horses to determine the appropriate threshold for pressure that should be applied in an inspection. He concluded that non-sored horses could tolerate a pressure greater than 10 kg/cm² regardless of their sex, body weight, or recent exercise. Most digital palpation would result in a force of only .4 to .6 kg/cm².

The limitations of Haussler's study include that all the horses tested were flat shod and were in their home environment. He said that sored horses had not yet been tested to determine how they would react. But he did conclude that pressure algometry, in lieu of digital pressure, could quantify mechanical pressure for use in an examination.

John Burke, vice president of Biographs LLC, presented the product PainTrace, a patented, non-invasive device that measures the skin's response to pain. PainTrace was developed for use in humans to objectively measure pain, but it was found to have use in veterinary medicine since veterinarian patients cannot describe their pain. Studies indicate that PainTrace has high statistical significance in both equine and human trials.

The portable, handheld device can monitor pain while a horse moves by attaching electrodes to either side of the horse's neck. The device gives a reading in under a minute. The more negative a reading, the more pain the horse is in. Positive readings indicate little or no pain. The device does not locate the source of the pain.

PainTrace is currently being studied with horses in competition at Keeneland Race Course.

USEF Drugs and Medications Chief Administrator Stephen Schumacher described the drug testing done within the breeds USEF governs in an effort to provide a level playing field for its competitors. USEF randomly collects blood and urine samples from USEF competitions. In 2007, USEF tested over 17,000 equine blood and urine samples. Schumacher also described the USEF and FEI rules that would prohibit soring.

"USEF takes rule violations very seriously," said Schumacher. "Publishing our findings is an important deterrent." He quoted USEF's former administrator Dr. John Lengel. "Rules without enforcement are worse than meaningless, they are hypocrisy."

Dr. Tracy Turner presented his findings from the thermography seminar held in Shelbyville, Tenn., in December. Turner concluded that 14 of the 15 horses presented were abnormal. He said five had an abnormal pastern, three had abnormal hooves, five had an abnormal pastern and abnormal hooves, and one had an abnormal

cannon.

Turner explained that thermography should be used to enhance a clinical examination. "You are not trying to make a diagnosis, but to detect areas that need more analysis," said Turner. He said that upon further examination, including palpation and digital radiography, 11 of the 14 horses initially deemed abnormal were confirmed to be abnormal.

Turner concluded that his study supported the previous findings that thermography could be used to determine if a horse is in compliance with the HPA. He said that thermography would be introduced during the 2008 horse show season and that 2009 plans were to incorporate it into the regular inspection process. Thermography is currently being used by the equine show jumping and dressage disciplines.

Digital radiography was also presented. This enhanced x-ray shows much more detail in the soft tissues to give a more elaborate look into the foot. Digital radiography can detect shoeing or hoof trimming that causes a horse pain or distress, objects or materials inserted between the pad and hoof other than acceptable hoof packing, pads not made of acceptable materials, weights attached to the shoe or hoof wall, or artificial extensions of the hoof. Digital radiography also assists in obtaining accurate heel to toe measurements.

Dr. Turner illustrated with a digital radiograph in which 49 nails had been put into a shoe package in an effort to add lead to the weight of the package. "Do we really need 49 nails, 36 of them in the toe, to hold this package together?" asked Turner.

The audience asked about the costs of the various technologies. Thermographic cameras cost between \$8,000 and \$20,000. The PainTrace device retails for \$3,600, but a simpler version without the computer download capability costs \$1,800 with discounts available for nonprofits. The pressure algometer costs about \$175.

Affecting Cultural Change

A diverse group of panelists initiated the discussion on how to change cultural behaviors. Dr. Joseph Donnermeyer's major field of study is criminology and he discussed the ways to change criminal behavior within a society.

His suggestions for affecting cultural change include reconnaissance, study (other successful behavioral changes such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving), rely on basic American and religious values, destroy rationalizations, uncover and make public the problems and encourage and praise the enforcers and the converts.

Dr. Martha Day is the director of DQPs for the National Walking Horse Association. She indicated that NWA had been formed to affect this cultural change, and they have since become the largest Tennessee Walking Horse flat shod organization.

"At the 2006 Celebration, when a winner was not crowned, many in the anti-soring movement were happy to see that happen. I was not. That publicity didn't expose soring; it just damaged our industry. The public perception goes far and wide," said Day.

"We need to make this so socially unacceptable from within the industry that the behavior becomes a thing of the past. The Tennessee Walking Horse has a tremendous impact on Tennessee. We need to change our industry from within to preserve that. Enforcement will only happen when it becomes socially unacceptable," said Day.

Day said the NWAH DQP program inspected 16,485 horses and wrote 17 tickets for a violation rate of one tenth of one percent, including technical violations.

Doug Scoles spoke as the state executive director for Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Scoles explained the culture of the 1970s when driving drunk was not considered a crime. MADD started in 1980 as a grass roots organization, with each member making a personal commitment to effect change. Their most effective strategy was to put a face on the numbers by bringing groups of people who were victims of drunk driving to the public. These were the first people to show their grief in public, which has become commonplace today.

Scoles said that MADD has been very successful in reducing people killed by drunk driving from 34,000 to less than 13,000, but they are not satisfied at this point. MADD works on many fronts. They have passed legislation and they have secured the alcohol industry as supporters of responsible drinking. They are also researching technology within the automakers that would test blood alcohol content on the steering wheel. These new cars would not start if blood alcohol content was over the limit. Scoles also encouraged sending personal emails to members of Congress.

"We need a new breakthrough," said Scoles. "We want to eliminate this crime in the next 10 to 15 years through technology. We're pushing Congress to consider this and we are using our grass roots approach to contact them."

Joy Sizemore, a pre-veterinary high school student, also shared her impressions of soring and how to reach and educate youth involved in Tennessee Walking Horses.

How Information & Communication Could Help

Saturday's first panel discussion featured a forum on how information and communication could help to end soring. Lori Northrup and FOSH attorney Callista Puchmeyer gave examples where Americans publicize offenders to deter crime. They demonstrated on the web accessible lists of violators of animal cruelty laws.

FOSH publishes the violators of the HPA. As a signatory to the Operating Plan, FOSH is mandated to provide the list in one of three ways from publishing it to providing the list upon request.

Northrup explained that having the suspension lists available would aid DQPs and show management in accurately honoring suspension lists, assist in selecting judges, leaders and honorees for the industry, help people searching for a sound horse trainer and measure the HIOs ability to self-regulate.

Northrup illustrated the need for knowledge in selecting judges, leaders and honorees with a host of statistics.

Northrup explained that the USDA only attended 6.3 percent of the Tennessee Walking Horse shows, thus forcing the USDA to rely upon industry self-regulation. According to Northrup, statistics show that the HPA violation rate is significantly higher when the USDA is present than when they are not in most HIOs. Northrup concluded that self-regulation was not effective.

Northrup suggested the following:

1. Interested HIOs join together to make more suspension information available.
2. Decide on an appropriate time frame to include on the published list. For example, rather than post the entire HPA suspension history, a shorter period of time, say two, four, or six years, might be published to allow reformed violators a

chance to come off the list.

3. Allow a period for HIOs to review the data to ensure its accuracy before it is made public.
4. Make historical information public as needed.
5. Include the number of horses at each show in the data.
6. Require all 14 HIOs and the USDA to use the same master form to record violations.

Prevent Soring Within Your Breed

Panelists from the American Quarter Horse Association and the Rocky Mountain Horse Association joined the Director of Judges for the Independent Judging Association to discuss soring prevention.

Denny Hales, vice president of the Ohio Quarter Horse Association, sponsor of the Quarter Horse Congress, discussed the problems of rule violations within the Quarter Horse breed.

"Our problems are heads and tails. Heads, both with mind-altering drugs and with extremely low head carriages, and tails with breaking, cutting, or blocking," explained Hales.

Initially, AQHA tried to solve the "peanut roller" problem by implementing the "five stride rule."

"It was a good standard but it didn't solve the problem," Hales said. Eventually that rule was removed and the AQHA went to an educational process whereby the top 100 trainers in western pleasure were invited to a two-day conference to determine what the new guidelines should be.

"We got a whole new attitude. The trainers are now helping to take care of the problem," said Hales.

Hales indicated that the AQHA wants to solve its problems on their own. "We saw the USDA mandating requirements for the walking horse industry, and we wanted to solve our problems on our own," said Hales. "Now we have a tail machine that can determine if a horse's tail has been altered."

Hales also pointed out that the more testing you do, the cheaper the testing becomes, and therefore the more testing you can do. In fact, as testing has become cheaper, the AQHA has found themselves with extra money available from the drug testing program and is able to put that money back into prize programs.

Hales answered a large number of questions from the audience. AQHA inspectors are aided by professional trainers in identifying other trainers who violate rules by hanging their horses' heads in the stalls (then they carry them low in the show ring). He also explained the AQHA penalty structure for altered tails includes a minimum 120-day suspension on the first offense and a potential life suspension on a second offense. "You might say we slap their wrist the first time and cut off their hand the second," said Hales.

"We don't have all the answers. We still have problems. We are working right now, similarly to you all, to consolidate suspension lists among the different associations so that everyone is playing on the same field. We publish the suspension lists in the Quarter Horse Journal, but the rumor mill works pretty good too," explained Hales.

Sandy McCart spoke about the problems within the Rocky Mountain breed. She said that they implemented the DQP program and virtually eliminated the problem of chemical irritants, but that they still faced problems with road-foundering horses and contracted heels.

Dianne Little explained the role of Equine Canada, an

organization equivalent to the United States Equestrian Federation, who sets its own rules and can test walking horses at any point.

"There is no soring in Canada, but still we have the continuing perception problem," said Little. "I think we have to educate people on evaluating the whole horse. We have to focus on the welfare of the horse so that they are happy, healthy and sound."

"I will be the happiest person in this room when education deals with the entire horse, not just the feet and legs," she concluded.

Proposed Research Needed

The research panel featured Dr. James Belknap, Dr. Kevin Haussler, Dr. Steve O'Gray and Paul Roberson (who did a three-dimensional gait analysis of the running walk at the University of Tennessee).

Many studies were proposed from studying available technology under varying circumstances to studying the Tennessee Walking Horse gait in more detail.

The USDA's Future Plans

Dr. Rachel Cezar and Mike Tuck presented the USDA's plans for enforcement of the HPA in 2008. Specifically, they detailed how the new technology would be used in enforcement.

Dr. Cezar explained foreign substance testing via gas chromatography and mass spectrometry. Mass spectrometry has largely replaced gas chromatography as it is more detailed and specific.

In 2007, 14 shows were randomly selected for "sniffer" testing and 353 horses were tested at those 14 shows. One hundred seventy-five horses tested positive for a foreign substance, or 50 percent of the horses tested.

Cezar said USDA plans to implement a penalty protocol for foreign substances by May 1, 2008. The draft proposal sent to the HIOs provided for a letter of warning on a first offense, an HIO two-week suspension on a second offense and a federal case on a third offense. Cezar said the comments received from the HIOs varied from suggesting two-week suspensions for every offense to concerns about HIOs administering any penalty due to the chain of custody of evidence such that USDA should handle all penalties.

Cezar explained that the USDA would incorporate the use of thermography as a part of the inspection process for the 2008 show season. She said the VMOs were being trained now and that it would be used only to gather information to further validate their findings in 2008.

"Thermography will be an adjunct to our inspection. They will take an image and also inspect the horse. It can be used prior or post show," explained Cezar.

USDA attended 31 shows in 2007. Currently there are 100 federal investigations open and 21 federal cases currently at the office of general counsel for litigation.

"I hope to pass the baton so that you can do your own regulation the way USEF (United States Equestrian Federation) does. I do enjoy working with this industry and I'm not going to quit, ever, but by all of us working together, you all can self-police yourselves. We don't want to be seen as the police. We want to be here to work with you guys," explained Cezar.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the two-day conference was a brainstorming session among all the participants to generate a list of all the possible ideas to end soring. The list of ideas generated is in the sidebar, and as participants left the conference, they voted for their top choices to help direct the next step of the sound horse movement.

Walking Horse Trainers' Association President Link Webb contributed to the list of ideas by suggesting that all of the horse groups and disciplines needed to develop better working relationships by sitting down in more productive discussions.

Ideas were also generated for next year's conference. Dr. Eleanor Green of the American Association of Equine Practitioners volunteered to host the 2009 conference, along with other volunteers as well. Plans are already underway to continue these productive conversations among the various organizations and disciplines for the future.

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