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USDA Horse Protection Program Utilizing Iris Scan Technology for Equine Identification

Questions and Answers

APHIS' Horse Protection program has a new technological tool that will allow its inspectors to better identify horses before they enter the inspection area. Beginning in March 2013, APHIS will be using iris scanners as part of the agency's continued efforts to put an end to horse soring through its enforcement of the Horse Protection Act.

The Horse Protection Act is a federal law that prohibits sored horses from participating in shows, sales, exhibitions or auctions. The Act also prohibits drivers from transporting sored horses to or from any of these events. Soring is a cruel and inhumane practice used to accentuate a horse's gait; it may be accomplished by irritating or blistering a horse's forelegs through the application of chemicals or mechanical devices. Walking horses are known for possessing a naturally high gait, but in order to be successful in competition; their natural gait is often exaggerated. The exaggerated gait can be achieved with proper training and considerable time. However, some exhibitors, owners and trainers have chosen to use improper training methods to shorten the time it would take to produce a higher gait in their horses.

APHIS works actively with the horse industry to protect against soring and to ensure that only sound and healthy horses participate in shows.

APHIS' ultimate goal is to end this inhumane practice completely.

Question: Why is APHIS using iris scans when there are already other means in place to identify horses?

Answer: Scanning a horse's iris is a pain-free, non-invasive alternative to branding, tattooing and other identification methods. It limits undue stress to the animal.

Q: What are the benefits to this particular method of identifying horses?

A: These scanners will allow APHIS to establish a definitive identity of a horse because no two irises are alike. Iris scans are more accurate than even a human fingerprint. Plus, an iris scan is a totally non-invasive means of identifying a horse – unlike micro-chipping or tattooing.

Iris scans also tell APHIS whether or not a particular horse has ever been sored before because the scanners maintain an information database that includes any previous Horse Protection Act violations. This provides a much better tracking system for APHIS – and the industry – than what is currently in place.

Q: How does the scanner work?

A: These scanners will produce a digital photograph of the iris of a horse's eye. The photographs, along with other information about each horse, are stored electronically in the scanner's processor.



Q: What is the benefit to breeders, trainers, owners and exhibitors and the walking horse industry as a whole?

A: This will be a very good thing for all individuals who are not soring their horses. For example, using iris scans will allow a potential buyer to learn if a particular horse has ever been sored when that animal's history comes up on the scanner. This will help an owner sell his/her horse with proof that the horse has not been sored.

Iris scans will also aid the industry because this method of horse identification will decrease the number of sored horses that are being shown or sold. Scanning will identify which horses are sored and which are clean – and keep a record of it.

Iris scans will also show how particular regions of the country are adhering to the Horse Protection Act by showing where soring is more prevalent. For instance, if a number of sored horses are coming out of a particular county, the industry can focus its education efforts in that county to show the trainers there that they don't need to sore their horses in order to get successful results. This will keep the focus on humane methods of training horses.

Q: How will using iris scans decrease horse soring?

A: A person who has been cited for soring his horse during a competition will have very little incentive for entering a horse into another class during that same competition because the scanner will identify the infraction to APHIS the next time that horse's irises are scanned.

Q: Was there anything in particular that prompted APHIS to begin using iris scanners at this time?

A: APHIS is responding to the 2010 Office of Inspector General audit of its Horse Protection program. One of the audit's recommendations was for the agency to prohibit horses that have been disqualified (due to soring violations) from competing in any other classes at a horse show, exhibition or other horse-related event. APHIS has the authority under the Horse Protection Act to prohibit horses from competing in subsequent events after designated qualified persons (DQPs) or APHIS veterinary medical officers detect a violation. To better ensure that sored horses do not compete in later events, the agency wanted a totally reliable way to identify horses. Thus, APHIS decided to use iris scanners to better identify horses.

Q: How much does each scanner cost American taxpayers?

A: The cost is \$3,000 per scanner.

Q: Will the use of iris scans result in additional fees for the walking horse industry or to individual competitors?

A: No. There is no cost to horse owners/trainers/owners/riders, and there is no cost passed along to the walking horse industry.

Q: When will APHIS begin using these scanners?

A: APHIS will begin using iris scanners in March – the beginning of the 2013 horse show season.

Q: Will DQPs be using iris scanners as well?

A: No. Only APHIS will be using these scanners at this time. But the agency certainly encourages horse industry organizations to utilize this technology as well.

Q: Is the use of iris scanners related to the other federal animal identification/traceability program, in which farmers are being asked to register all of their animals with the government?

A: No. This is simply a method of better identifying horses in the agency's continue efforts to achieve its goal of eliminating the cruel and inhumane practice of soring horses.

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